

The problem of death

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Date: 02 July 2017

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[0:00] I've called this sermon the problem of death. If you wanted a subtitle, you could call it, I suppose, The ritual of the red cow, which is what it is.

The key verse here, I think, in this passage is verse 13, and a couple of other verses which say essentially the same thing, but the most complete verse is verse 13, and it's actually quite difficult to translate, to get all the subtleties of it.

The general meaning is clear enough, but there are some subtleties that translators struggle with. So let me read out a fairly literal translation of it.

I should say, of course, I didn't manage to make the language gender-neutral as well, but I think it's meant to be, but it's just clunky enough as it is. I thought if I tried to use gender-neutral language as well, it would not work at all, so I apologize for that.

But it certainly is meant to be gender-neutral. It's certainly not talking just about men. And this is what verse 13 says in a sort of fairly literal translation.

[1:14] Whoever touches the dead nefesh, I'll come back to that in a minute, of a person, and the word for person there is Adam, whoever touches the dead nefesh of a person that is dead, does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the Lord, and that nefesh shall be cut off from Israel, because the water of impurity was not tossed on him, he shall be unclean.

His uncleanness is yet upon him. This word nefesh is really very difficult to translate accurately. It can have a variety of meanings. It can mean a soul. It can mean a living human or animal body. It can also, as you see here, can mean a corpse.

And there are various other meanings that are perhaps less relevant here. But the root meaning seems to be something that has or has had life in the sense of also having breath.

So it's distinguished both from plants, which are alive, but they don't breathe, but also inanimate things. So that seems to be the root meaning.

[2:33] It says in Genesis, man became a living nefesh, but it also says that the animals became nefesh. And as I said before, Numbers 19 is the end of the first part of the book.

In chapters 20, verse 1, we find the people are back at Kadesh, and it looks as though it's a sort of rehash of the chapters we've been looking at. But it turns out, as you read on, that in fact this is all 40 years later.

Chapter 20, verse 1, is when the project gets going again, the entry into the land starts to get going again.

But before this happens, we have this final word of the wanderings in the wilderness. And it seems quite a strange one. So what are we to make of it?

Well, it's basically, of course, a ritual of cleaning, of cleansing. And I suggest we try and look at it under these headings. So I've divided four headings there.

[3:44] First of all, we'll look at the basic features of the ritual. And then we'll look at the purpose of the ritual. And then we'll look at the operation of the ritual, how it was carried out and how it worked.

And then finally, we'll ask the fact, well, does this have any relevance to us today? So that's how we're going to do it. So let's look first at the facts and features of the ritual.

And the first thing that is worth pointing out is that there is an element just to practicality here. We have people in the desert. They're dying of thirst, hunger and plague in the desert.

They're about to embark on a war. And basically, they're going to have to deal with a large number of corpses. And if you had to sacrifice one animal per corpse, not only would it take a great deal of time, but you'd very soon run out of livestock.

And so the point here, this one sacrifice can cover a lot of deaths until you run out of the ash that is left over from the burning. But the question is, why do we need it anyway?

[4:58] And to get our head around this, we're going to look at the text in a little more detail to see what's going on here. So what are some of the features? Well, probably the most obvious feature is that there's something red going on.

This is unusual in itself. Normally, for a sacrifice, the colour doesn't matter. But here, it's specifically said that it's a red cow. But there are other red things as well.

Cedar wood, of course, is red. If you've ever seen anything made of cedar, it's quite a strong red colour. And we're told there's scarlet thread or scarlet wool is also included in the ritual.

There's a reference, perhaps, to the temple curtain. We noted when we studied the blue thread in the tassels that the people would wear on their clothes, that there was a blue thread in the temple curtain.

But there's also a red thread in the temple curtain. So there's probably a reference to that. But basically, of course, one doesn't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure out that red is the colour of blood.

[6:02] And I think this is the main point here, of course. Blood, and particularly spilled blood, signifies the loss of life in Hebrew thought. So on several occasions in the Pentateuch, it says the life is in the blood.

Genesis 9, verse 4, Leviticus 17, verse 11 are examples of this. And as in Revelation, we read of the lamb that looked as though it had been slayed.

In a sense, this cow is already red. So it looks almost, even before it's actually been killed, as though it has blood on it. So that's the first most obvious thing of the ritual, this red thing going on. But you'll notice there's also a clean, unclean thing. There's a lot of references to being clean and unclean. And that's probably where the hyssop comes in. Because hyssop is a plant in the mint family.

It isn't red. Some varieties, I looked it up, and some varieties do have pink flowers. But there's no real red association with hyssop. The main association with hyssop is it's used both as a medicinal agent and as a cleaning agent.

[7:16] And that's probably the significance here. Perhaps both of these uses have some significance. And it also talks about water.

In verse 17, the modern translations rather blandly describe it as fresh water. Older translations describe it as running water.

A literal translation of the Hebrew would actually describe it as live water or living water. Not that water is actually alive, of course, but in the way it springs up from the ground or runs in a spring, it almost appears to be alive.

And so, while freshness is certainly part of it, it doesn't just mean fresh out of a tap in one sense. It means actually running, living water.

So there's certainly something about cleaning going on in this ritual. And, of course, there's a great deal about people. Hebrew has quite a variety of words for either for men specifically or for people in general, and some for women as well, of course.

[8:30] The most commonly used words in this text are ish and adam. Ish is used in verse 19 for the one who gathers the ashes together, and probably correctly translated man there.

It's almost certainly a man who would have been given that job. Most other places that refer to a person use the word adam.

And although adam can mean man, the use here does appear to be not gender specific. It just means a person or something like that. And probably, therefore, the new NIV, which translates it as person, is probably correct there.

In a few cases, actually, there's no noun at all. When it says someone clean must deal with a ritual, actually, often it just says the clean must do it.

The noun is actually implied in the Hebrew. But the particular use here, as we've already noted, is this word nefesh.

[9:38] And that's used actually, I think it's five times. One, two, three, four. No, six times, sorry. Six times. It's used in verse 11.

It's used, as we've already seen, twice in verse 13. And it's used in 18 and 20 and 22. And it does seem to have a sort of special meaning here.

What is cut off from Israel in verses 13 and 20? It's the nefesh. It's the life. The breath, as it were. What is it that must be cleaned in verse 18?

Or what is it that specifically is unclean in verse 22? It is the nefesh, the life. As I said, it can refer to an animal, so it doesn't mean a soul in the technical sense.

But it does seem to have some meaning of something that has breath and life in that sense. Or has had breath and life in that sense, although it's now dead. But you notice that the other usages of the word in verse 11 and verse 13 are actually referred to the corpse.

[10:47] Describes it as a dead life, if you like. A dead nefesh. Although when I was discussing this with Phil during the week, and he pointed out that in chapter 5, I think it is, and there's also a reference to corpses, it just uses nefesh there to mean a corpse.

The dead there is implied. There is, does seem to be, some significance particularly to this word. It's the sort of life that can be contaminated with death, that can lose its breath.

I won't read too much into it, but that does seem to be something of the meaning here. It's that life which must be cut off from the assembly. Never mind.

And so what is clear from this is that the whole passage, the whole ritual is something to do with life and death. So let's think what are we supposed to make of this.

One might think at first that it's just a medical issue. Hissab was certainly used for medical reasons, and indeed a lot of this actually makes sense in the medical point of view.

[12:04] If you're to wash your body in clothes after touching a dead body, it's certainly a very good idea, because the risk of cholera or typhoid is significant.

And the insistence, if you think about it, on using running water or fresh water would also provide some protection against cholera and typhoid, as would the cleansing of open containers, which might have been contaminated.

Now, I imagine there is some truth in that. We tend to make a distinction, don't we, between God's wrath and between those who suffer disease or disaster. And in fact, Jesus tells us to do that, doesn't he?

If you remember in Luke 13, verses 4 and 5, he tells us, those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. So Jesus does make a distinction between the wrath and the disaster.

[13:09] But probably in the early Bronze Age and in the time of the Exodus, there would probably be a closer tie in the minds of the people between God's wrath and between disaster.

We've seen several of these as we've gone through numbers, haven't we? Sometimes we're told the medical cause of a judgment, such as when they got food poisoning from the quails.

It's fairly clear in that case that what caused the food poisoning was the fact they'd heaped them all up and allowed them to go rotten in the hot weather. Sometimes we're not told, in chapter 16, we are just told that wrath has gone out from the Lord and the plague has begun.

Our scientific way of thinking about medicine wants to know the disease carrier, the vector. And of course, sometimes we're not told that. In chapter 16, there isn't an indication.

But nonetheless, I think there probably is some sort of a link here. And certainly, some of this ritual you can think of, as I say, as basic hygiene. And that would certainly reduce disease and therefore would probably be seen as a sign of blessing.

[14:21] It's been said that cleanliness is next to godliness. In that sense, at least, you might say that cleanliness is godliness. But having all said all that, I don't think that you can say that this is just about medicine.

And let's see some reasons for that. And I don't think you should say that the people in those days were completely stupid. They were clear that the plague would take victims irrespective of their guilt or innocence, weren't they?

What Moses actually said in chapter 16, verse 46, was that wrath has gone out from the Lord, the plague has started. And you can't dispense with either part of that sentence, can you?

If we were just told that wrath had gone out from the Lord, we might ask why that matters and say, okay, fair enough. But it doesn't affect me, does it? We need to know how that wrath was executed. But at the same time, if we'd just been told that a plague had started, we might very well say, well, anyway, everyone gets ill. Because that's true, isn't it? The connection is given explicitly there.

[15:34] And I also pointed out at the time that when Aaron took action, he stood between the living and the dead.

He didn't stand between the guilty and the innocent. He stood between the dead and the living. And to escape the judgment on Dathan and Abiram, if you remember, the warning was to move away from their tents because they were just about to be swallowed up.

You could have been innocent. And yet, if you'd stayed near their tent, you would have been caught in that disaster. So there is also a distinction between the wrath and the disease and the effect of it. So I'd suggest to you that while there are undoubtedly medical benefits from these procedures, that these are not the core meaning. I think it'd be fair to say that disease is more than just a metaphor for God's judgment.

But perhaps we should think of it as a sign of God's judgment. I mean, a metaphor for London, we might say, oh, it's like a big sort of big apple where lots of people can live and do their own thing.

[16:49] A sign says, if you want to know about London, go that way. And I think perhaps this is, I say, a sign, disease or disaster in numbers, thought of as a sign of God's judgment, and yet they're not actually the thing itself.

And so here are some reasons why I would suggest we shouldn't treat this chapter as just an issue of public health, although that is certainly part of it. First of all, did you notice that in verse 9 we are told that the ashes are to be kept as a sin offering?

Now that's actually rather strange in itself because it's quite different from other sin offerings that we read about because there's not actually a sin attached to it in any obvious sense.

The usage of this ash is cleansing after contact with the dead. And yet, certainly having contact with the dead, respecting your dead and bury them, is certainly not a sin in the usual sense of the word, is it?

In fact, it's a religious duty. And yet, it does lead to a kind of spiritual uncleanness according to chapter 19, and in that sense it's a sin offering.

[18:11] There is a moral issue here, even though it's not quite a moral issue in the usual sense. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense to describe it as a sin offering. And secondly, if the cleansing were purely medical, one would be clean as soon as the washing had occurred, wouldn't we?

But those who touch the ashes are unclean until the evening, and those who touch a human dead body, you will notice, are unclean for a week. And that's true even if the proper procedures are carried out.

And the third reason that it's not just a medical thing is that we are told, in fact, that the sanctuary of the Lord is defiled. Well, what does that mean?

I mean, a tent can't catch cholera or typhoid. But in some way, the sanctuary of the Lord is defiled. But this defilement is a spiritual thing.

It's not something you can clean off, in a sense, although they are cleaning it off, in one sense, but it's not a literal thing you can scrub off. And it's a human death that makes a difference, because most animal sacrifices actually are carried out within the tent, in the altar.

[19:33] But they don't defile it. It's specifically a human death that defiles the sanctuary. So, the primary focus here, we have to say, is not a medical one.

But if it's not a medical one, what is it? And a clue is provided by verse 16, because it tells us a lot of things don't matter.

First of all, it doesn't matter who the dead person was. It might have been a very godly man, or it might have been a terrible sinner.

But that's entirely irrelevant as far as this is concerned. Merely touching the body makes you unclean. There's no veneration of relics here. Touching an unclean, touching a dead body, whoever it belonged to, makes you unclean here.

And secondly, it tells us it doesn't matter how they died. They may have died through war or disease, the kind of things we sometimes think of as judgment of God.

[20:41] But they may have died from disease. They may have just died from some accident. They may have died from attack by an animal. The reference to loose bones might suggest an animal attack.

Or they may just have died of old age and buried in a grave and a tomb in the normal way. It doesn't matter how they died, but it's the death itself that's the uncleanness.

And as we've already seen, a corpse is a dead life, a life that has been infected and destroyed, as we might say, by the disease of death. A rock isn't unclean.

In fact, we read conveniently, you've got to store these ashes somewhere and you can find a place in the desert that's clean. Well, that will be a place you've got to be able to find them again, so presumably there'll be a rock there and maybe some sand.

But a sand and rock have never been alive and so they can't be infected by the disease of death and therefore they are not subject to the curse of death.

[21:55] They're not unclean. Although interestingly, as we've said, the tent of meeting can become unclean perhaps because it houses the very life of God. But death is the real infection here.

It's not really typhoid or cholera that they're worried about. It's death itself that is the real infection that really makes people unclean. So let's look at the way the thing works.

And you may have noted there are a lot of paradoxes here. The priest sacrifices the heifer. That's an express command of the Lord.

It's a necessary preparation for the purification ritual. And yet in doing it the priest himself becomes unclean. It's a paradox in itself, isn't it?

He's doing exactly what the Lord told him to do and yet in doing it he becomes unclean. Normally the sacrifices are made in the center of the camp and carried out.

[23:03] But here actually the whole thing is done outside the camp. There is another difference. In this case the sacrifice is a cow not a bull or a male lamb.

As I said on Wednesday I still don't know why it's a cow here. Nobody knows please tell me. It is a difference. And how does the ritual actually work?

Well there's a kind of paradox there as well. It seems that the lesser uncleanness of an animal death somehow drives out or washes away the greater uncleanness of a human death.

And yet you'll notice it doesn't do it instantly. There's a double application. It has to be done on the third day and the seventh day.

It takes a week. So as I say it's on the third day and the seventh day. What do they refer to? Well the seventh day perhaps refers to creation and the fall.

[24:11] It takes a week for the work of God to be done in that sense. But what's the third day point to? Not at that point nothing obvious at all. So what are we to make of this?

In fact I'll suggest to you that what we have here is a graphic picture of the whole idea of substitutionary atonement. So let's spell it out a bit.

The priest the clean man who administers the ritual and the person who is cleansed may all appear to be innocent but in fact they're not.

In fact they're all affected infected by death. The fact that they're subject to death is evidence of that. The ritual uncleanness of contact with death is perhaps just an illustration of the actual uncleanness of sin because death is Eden's curse isn't it?

If you eat of it you shall die. The fact that they're all subject to death is evidence that they all come under the curse isn't it? And all men and women inherit the sinfulness and guilt of our first parents.

[25:31] and so this is indeed a sin offering as verse 9 tells us and what is it that defiles the tent of meeting? It's that sinfulness that's

symbolized by death itself.

Death is the curse and the curse should not come near the tent of meeting. That's the place where we approach God. It results in us being cut off from the presence of God and his people but God has made provision although the sacrifice is carried out outside the camp the priest sprinkles some of the ashes or the water I can't remember but sprinkles some of the sacrifice anyway towards the tent of meeting.

He's saying there isn't he that he's opening a way back from outside the camp the unholy the unclean place back to the tent of meeting.

There's a substitution of the death of this cow for the death that all of us deserve.

So let's finally think about how this relates to us today. one death serves doesn't it to cover many deaths.

[27:02] It's a valuable heifer that's sacrificed it's not some old cow that was going to be destroyed anyway we're told it's one that's never been used to burn yolk probably never been milked either that's why the actual Hebrew just says a cow but the suggestion is obviously that it's a young cow a valuable animal I've already pointed out the cow is red as if it's covered in blood and that the death is carried out outside the camp not in the holy place and yet verse 4 it is offered to the holy place it opens the way to that place and the great paradox of course is that it takes a death to drive out death the animal is slaughtered as if it's paying the price for all the other deaths as if it's in a sense cancelling out the other deaths the animal is innocent and yet its death is unclean it receives the curse upon itself how does it work how is it applied it works by washing you'll notice there's both a symbolic washing in verse 18 sprinkling with a hyssop and an actual bath and clothes washing in verse 19 the ritual washing perhaps restores access to the tent and meeting and the actual washing perhaps removes any residual trace of the death you might say nowadays and scientifically any contamination that remained as the top lady well known lines from that top lady hymn puts it be of sin the double cure save me from its guilt and power the ritual washing opens the way to the holy place the bath and the washing of clothes removes the actual effect of the death and we need both those things don't we we are sanctified in one sense through the blood of

Christ immediately but also we need to be saved from the power of death and that takes time salvation doesn't happen easily or quickly and I said it takes a week perhaps referring to God's work in creation but the effect is startling isn't it it results in restoration to the assembly of God's people and renewed access to God himself at the tent it seems like just killing a cow and of course cows are killed every day I mean they weren't vegetarians the Jews and animals were killed for food and that didn't make them unclean interestingly enough as long as they poured the blood out they didn't take the blood it didn't make them unclean but this animal makes them unclean because it's taken the curse upon itself and death is unavoidable and contact with death is unavoidable but the cleansing you notice must be received voluntarily the cleansing works by faith the person has a choice they could agree to go through this ritual or they could not go through the ritual saying well it's just a water or ashes from a dead cow it's not going to do me anything any good at all it works by faith doesn't it that he or she submits to the ritual because he or she believes it provides real cleansing from real uncleanness it keeps the subject within the covenant relationship between the lord and his people if you don't go through it you're cut off so although it's voluntary it's not optional the ritual is a turning away from the way of death it's saying in fact you go to the priest and say I've been contaminated with death I want you to wash me clean of it and if you reject it and say I'm not going to go through this it's just pantomime or something like that just meaning this mumbo jumbo if you do that you're excluded from God's people and actually you're signing up for death you say well actually yeah I don't mind death being contaminated with death I'm going to let it rule in my life I'm going to be subject to death I don't want to wash it away so it's actually a very powerful ritual it's saying by saying I know I'm going to die because I'm human but I'm not going to be contaminated with the uncleanness of spiritual death the curse that comes with it it's a turning away

from the curse and the rule of death and turning to the life of the Lord but of course the skeptic has got a bit of a point because the skeptic might say can a dead cow really do that and of course these people did die still in fact the very next section of numbers we read of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron maybe that's why perhaps these two sections were put together as the uncleanness of death and we read of the deaths of two of the leaders of God's people Miriam and Aaron can a dead cow really do anything useful a cow is only a cow in fact even the ritual itself in a sense suggests that because the contamination with the death of the cow only requires a day of cleansing whereas contamination with a human corpse requires a whole week of cleansing but instead that carcass points us to a different death doesn't it a death that really substitutes for ours and there is a clue there isn't there in that third day it's the sign of Jonah if you like although Jonah himself wouldn't be around for many centuries yet the third day is the day when the cleansing can start it's the day when the rejection of death and the defeat of death begins to take effect it's the day in fact of resurrection it's not a coincidence that Jesus was resurrected on the third day because it is the day when the cleansing starts when the rule of death is defied all familiar with those words in Hebrews I'm sure but let me read them to you again Hebrews 13 11 to 15 the high priest carries the blood of animals into the most holy place as a sin offering but the bodies are burned outside the camp and so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood let us then go to him outside the camp bearing the disgrace he bore for here we do not have an enduring city but we are looking for the city that is to come as those people were through

[35:03] Jesus therefore let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise not a sacrifice of livestock because there has been the real death now but a sacrifice of praise the fruit of lips that confess his name and that turns away and rejects death and says yes life is to be found through Jesus Christ so I invite you to meditate on the ritual of the red cow I would certainly encourage you to be clean in your habits at home and avoid the infection of disease that way but you may or may not be suffering from a deadly disease but every one of us seated here has been infected with that most deathly disease of all sin but there is a cure a provision has been made just as God made a provision even for those rebellious people in the desert there must be a death to drive out death but there has been a death to drive out death that which is unclean which takes on the curse as that

Hebrews passage reminds us a curse is outside the camp there is a disgrace it's burned outside the camp and outside the camp he bears the disgrace of the curse as that cow took on the curse which was what made its death unclean really that which is unclean serves for cleansing in fact it's the only effective agent and we are reminded that it's mixed with living water and living water as we know is a symbol of God's life giving spirit so John 4 14 says that the tea will wash us with living water but you do have to act say it's not optional but it is voluntary you do have to turn away from the path of death you do have to allow the cleansing to be applied to do to you if you reject the cleansing you will remain dirty numbers 9 13 is so repetitive isn't it in fact those whole verses are very repetitive because the writer wants us to make sure we've got the point if you don't turn away if you don't accept the cleansing that is offered then you will really be a dead nefesh you will really be cut off from the people of

God and from the fount of life you will be acknowledging the rule of death in your life and you do have to be up for it so I thought I'd finish with two things first of all I'd read John 8 you might like to turn to that John 8 chapters verses 21 to 30 and then we'll remind you of a few verses a few more lines from that top lady hymn and then we'll sing it so John 8 21 says the following these are the words of Jesus to the Jews I am going away and you will look for me and you will die in your sin where I go you cannot come and the Jews partly understood what he meant this made the Jews ask will he kill himself is that why he says where

I go you cannot come but he continued you are from below I am from above you are of this world I am not of this world I told you that you would die in your sins if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be you will indeed die in your sins notice the same repetition there as is used in numbers to make the point who are you they asked just what I have been claiming all along Jesus replied I have much to say in judgment of you but he who sent me is reliable and what I have heard from him

I tell the world they did not understand that he was telling them about his father so Jesus said when you have lifted up the son of man in other words when the sacrifice is made when he's died! just as Moses and the priest spoke the words that they were taught the one who sent me is with me he has not left me alone for I always do what pleases him the rest of us don't the rest of those people didn't but the priest does what pleases him and even as he spoke many put their faith in him they realised what he was getting at some of them others rejected him but others said yes I need to be washed I need to be cleaned I need that sacrifice so that's the question it raises are you washed in the water for cleansing the water of impurity or as we sing nowadays are you washed in the blood of the lamb that was only symbolic blood in those days but the lamb has shed his blood and do you keep returning there because they didn't have to go through this ritual once remember they all had to every time they touched a dead body they had to go and do it again and we all need to return to him for cleansing do we keep going back there do we keep saying we need the blood of the lamb to cleanse us to make us fit for heaven to make us fit to be with

[41:34] God's people so the original lines from that top lady hymn say foul I to the fountain fly wash me savior or I die the version we have actually is slightly blander but we'll sing it anyway I think it's a pity actually I don't see what was wrong with the original lines there but we'll sing it in the way