

God of all of life

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Date: 27 February 2022

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- [0 : 00] Well, folks, please pick up your Bibles, if you have them, and turn with me to the book of Leviticus. We're going to read two chapters of Leviticus this evening.
- We'll first read chapter 12, and then we'll skip ahead to chapter 15. Don't worry, we're not ignoring chapters 13 and 14. We'll come back to those next week, but for various reasons, we'll take 12 and 15 together tonight.
- So, Leviticus chapter 12. The Lord said to Moses, say to the Israelites, a woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period.
- On the eighth day, the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait 33 days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until the days of her purification are over.
- If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean, as during her period. Then she must wait 66 days to be purified from her bleeding. When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.
- [1 : 21] He shall offer them before the Lord to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood. These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl.
- But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way, the priest will make atonement for her and she will be clean.
- And on to chapter 15. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, speak to the Israelites and say to them, when any man has an unusual bodily discharge, such a discharge is unclean.
- Whether it continues flowing from his body or is blocked, it will make him unclean. This is how his discharge will bring about uncleanness. Any bed the man with a discharge lies on will be unclean, and anything he sits on will be unclean.
- Anyone who touches his bed must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whoever sits on anything that the man with a discharge sat on must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.
- [2 : 34] Whoever touches the man who has a discharge must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. If the man with a discharge spits on anyone who is clean, they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Everything the man sits on when riding will be unclean, and whoever touches any of the things that were under him will be unclean till evening. Whoever picks up those things must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone the man with a discharge touches without rinsing his hands with water must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

A clay pot that the man touches must be broken, and any wooden article is to be rinsed with water. When a man is cleansed from his discharge, he is to count seven days for his ceremonial cleansing.

He must wash his clothes and bathe himself with fresh water, and he will be clean. On the eighth day, he must take two doves or two young pigeons and come before the Lord to the entrance to the tent of meeting and give them to the priest.

The priest is to sacrifice them, the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering. In this way, he will make atonement before the Lord for the man because of his discharge. When a man has an emission of semen, he must bathe his whole body with water, and he will be unclean till evening.

Any clothing or leather that has semen on it must be washed with water, and it will be unclean till evening. When a man has sexual relations with a woman, and there is an emission of semen, both of them must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

[4 : 13] When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening.

Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean. They must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening.

Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean. They must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Whether it is the bed or anything she was sitting on, when anyone touches it, they will be unclean till evening.

If a man has sexual relations with her, and her monthly flow touches him, he will be unclean for seven days. Any bed he lies on will be unclean.

When a woman has a discharge of blood for many days at a time, other than her monthly period, or has a discharge that continues beyond her period, she will be unclean as long as she has the discharge, just as in the days of her period.

[5 : 15] Any bed she lies on while her discharge continues will be unclean, as is her bed during her monthly period, and anything she sits on will be unclean as during her periods.

Anyone who touches them will be unclean. They must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. When she is cleansed from her discharge, she must count seven days, and after that she will be ceremonially clean.

On the eighth day, she must take two doves or two young pigeons, and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The priest is to sacrifice one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering.

In this way, he will make atonement for her before the Lord, for the uncleanness of her discharge. You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.

These are the regulations for a man with a discharge, for anyone made unclean by an emission of semen, for a woman in her monthly period, for a man or a woman with a discharge, and for a man who has sexual relations with a woman who is ceremonially unclean.

[6 : 26] Amen. Well, folks, if you have ever been inclined to think of God as only interested in the big stuff, the doings of nations and great men, well, tonight's reading surely shows us otherwise.

If you thought God's interested in our souls or spirits, and that our bodies are irrelevant to him, well, not according to Leviticus. God designed our bodies.

We've sung that about being fearfully and wonderfully made. That is talking about our whole persons. It talks about us as mind, body, soul, and spirit. All of it knit together according to God's purposes.

God is the God of all of our lives. We saw last week, the law has implications for what people eat, sandwiched in between what we've read tonight.

So there's regulations about skin conditions and about buildings. We'll come back to those next week. Tonight, God speaks about the most intimate of topics, blood, semen, and other bodily emissions.

[7 : 42] Folks, no part of our lives is off limits to God. He made us. He knows us from head to toe. In fact, he knows not only every aspect of our bodies, but he knows our hearts too.

So this may not be the most comfortable of topics, but we're talking today about these things because they are part of life. And the Bible speaks to all of life. Which is not to say that we'll always like what it has to say, but it has things to say about all of life.

So let me make a couple of brief comments on chapter 12, and then we're going to focus primarily on chapter 15. First up, chapter 12, the uncleanness caused by childbirth. This is intrinsically related to the flow of blood.

Verse 2 says, the woman who gives birth is ceremonially unclean just as during her monthly period. So it's not something about giving birth itself, really. It's the loss of blood.

And we'll come back to the significance of that in a minute. Second, notice here in chapter 12, verse 8, notice the provision for a family that can't afford to bring a lamb.

[8 : 48] Instead, they bring two birds. We've seen it before, thinking about sacrifice. Sacrifices are supposed to be costly, but God does not intend them to be crippling.

He makes provision for his people, even as he explains their requirements. Third point from chapter 12, Jesus' parents did this.

Jesus' parents followed this process. They were good Jews. They did as Leviticus instructs. Luke chapter 2 records, on the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the law of Moses, that's these purification rites here in chapter 12. When the time came for the purification rites required by the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

As it is written in the law of the Lord, every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the law of the Lord.

[9 : 53] A pair of doves saw two young pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

Mary and Joseph come and do what the law requires of them and they find blessing in doing that. Simeon pronounces God's blessing on this child and on Mary and Joseph.

In keeping of God's law, blessing is found. And notice too, Joseph and Mary, they don't bring a lamb. Jesus was born into humble circumstances.

- [11 : 21] The Savior of the world laid in a feeding trough. His parents bring the birds, not a lamb. And yet, yet Mary has given birth to the lamb who will be offered to deliver his people from death and darkness.

So these Old Testament laws in Leviticus 12, they point us to and they find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Laws of cleansing after childbirth, chapter 12.

What then of chapter 15? Discharges, both male and female, both normal and abnormal. Four sections through the chapter. First abnormal male discharges, then normal ones, and normal female discharges, and abnormal.

That neat kind of chiastic arrangement inside and out. All bases covered. All of the above render one unclean.

And that uncleanness is always transmissible, both to other people and to objects and to people who then touch those objects. And we have plenty of lists of exactly how that works and how far it goes.

- [12 : 32] Normal discharges, for both male and female. Normal discharges require only a wash and a wait till evening to be clean again, whilst the abnormal discharges require a sacrifice of birds for cleansing.

So far, so equitable, male and female. Now, well, let's be honest. The situation here is way worse for women than men, isn't it?

Fearfully and wonderfully made. For half the population, one week in four is spent being unclean. Unable, therefore, to participate fully in the life of the community, barred from worship.

Unable, cannot come into the sanctuary. And not only that, but afraid even to touch anyone, lest they become unclean.

What kind of a God designs things this way? What kind of a God says to women, this normal part of your lives is unacceptable to me?

- [13 : 38] What kind of a God says that? Folks, I am very conscious that I'm wading into uncomfortable territory with these chapters.

If I put my foot in it, let me ask in advance for your forgiveness. But let me also say, I have found this book really very helpful in my preparations. Published last year, this is Rachel Jones, A Brief Theology of Periods.

Yes, really. I recommend it to you. I recommend it to the men who want to think more about how to be better fathers, husbands, brothers, in the broadest sense of the word brother.

To all of us who might want to think through more than we're going to think about tonight, think through a theology of periods. If we're saying that God made us in every aspect of our beings, that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, then we are saying that God has a reason for it.

that we can think theologically about these very ordinary parts of our lives, what God wants to teach us through it. And there's more in here of that than we will have time for tonight.

- [14 : 49] Rachel Jones, she's very clear in this book about the sense of shame that is often associated with menstruation. Women hiding the reality of the situation, hiding the circumstances that they are in, not only hiding it from men around them, but hiding it from one another.

Now, the cultural narrative here is shifting. It becomes gradually more acceptable as a topic for discussion or something that can be admitted to.

But I think it's telling that when Morrisons introduced their pilot scheme last year to provide free period products, they gave it a code name. Morrisons, you go to the customer service desk and you ask for a package from Sandy and they give you a discreet unmarked envelope.

Now, to be clear, I think it's a good scheme. It's good to have that desire to address period poverty and it is wise to have a discreet option. But we only need that discretion because of the attitudes of our culture, right?

Nobody's going to go and devise a code name for how you asked for a plaster, but this bleeding is different. And that sense of shame has serious consequences.

[16 : 05] Perhaps not as much in this country, but cultural taboos mean that in India, as many as 20% of girls will drop out of school when they reach puberty. Shame has serious consequences.

And let's be honest, Leviticus 15 has its part to play in the causes of that shame, doesn't it? I mean, not so much that your average 10-year-old girl has read Leviticus and knows therefore to feel that shame, but that Leviticus is part of the cultural heritage of our nation, of our culture.

Our attitudes as a country have been shaped by the Bible down through the ages. So is Leviticus 15 meant to cause a feeling of shame?

Are we supposed to feel shameful about this? How do we react to Leviticus 15? Well, one helpful point is to think a little bit about cultural context.

It is worth noting that actually when we talk about being unclean one week in four, well, it's maybe not quite so often as that because, well, girls get married a whole lot younger and spend a much higher proportion of their time either pregnant or breastfeeding and therefore less of their time unclean one week in four.

[17 : 26] Lessens it a little bit I suppose but it's not really enough is it? A little bit more helpful, the context within Leviticus gives us some context.

Let's note this is a relatively minor uncleanliness if we can use such a phrase. In that, you know, for normal menstrual bleeding, actually the woman isn't even told to wash to restore her cleanliness, let alone required to go and sacrifice birds or lambs.

And let's remember as well, men do suffer uncleanliness due to an emission or discharge as well. And so it is not entirely one-sided. Again, it helps a bit but only so far.

Slightly more substantially again for you and for me today, well let's note that these requirements don't apply today in the same way. Ladies, you are not unclean when you're on your period. If that needs to be made clear to you, let me say it now.

It doesn't work that way anymore. You are not excluded from the worshipful assembly. You can still come to a holy God. But that still leaves us wondering about the character of the kind of God who makes these laws in the first place, doesn't it?

[18 : 36] We sing psalms about the loveliness of God's laws. Well, this is those laws. This is part of that law that we say is sweeter than honey.

It's not just the psalms. Either Paul calls the law holy, righteous, and good. God hasn't changed. He's still the same God who made this law. Being unclean.

Being unclean can be a result of sin. Some sins cause you to be unclean. But more often, being unclean comes as a result of something natural, normal.

It's an ordinary thing that happens. You touch something. It's not in and of itself sinful to touch something, and yet it makes you unclean. So it's not always sinful, but there's still some kind of a link to sin going on.

Not all uncleanness is a result of sin, but I think all uncleanness is a reminder of sin. The rules of being clean and unclean, they set God's people apart from the Gentiles, quite obviously.

[19 : 51] You can see a difference in how God's people behave and how the nations around them behave, in what they eat, in how they act in worship, in what they do and don't do in their daily lives.

You come into an Israelite village and see the gaping hole in the wall where somebody's torn the stones out because of the mold, you wonder why on earth are they living with a gale howling through? you see a difference.

God's people have been made clean by his choosing of them and the Gentiles have not. But these stipulations of clean and unclean are still a part of daily life for the Israelites.

Nobody's going to make it through a year, probably not even through a month without being unclean some of the time. You touch the wrong piece of fabric. any act of intercourse between a husband and his wife, various skin conditions, entering particular buildings, you get unclean, it happens.

Why? Well maybe partly because God's people need to be reminded that sin isn't just a problem out there in the rest of the world, beyond the camp, for all those dirty Gentiles.

[21 : 07] No, sin is inside the camp. Sacrifices are required daily. Ceremonial washing is a part of day-to-day life. Days of exclusion from the temple come with regularity for a substantial proportion of the population.

John Calvin says corruption cleaves to the whole human race. Like an oil that you can't ever quite get off your skin. We're tainted by corruption.

It's there. And the wonderful thing is, the wonderful thing is Jesus comes to take away our shame.

It's not just a Sunday school answer. Jesus really is the answer. And if we're talking about the feeling of shame that comes from this kind of bleeding, well it's very appropriate, isn't it, to turn to the woman whose situation was exactly that of the last part of chapter 15.

this extended abnormal bleeding that verse 12, sorry, verse 25 of Leviticus 15 tells us she's going to be unclean as long as the bleeding continues.

[22 : 19] And in Mark chapter 5, we find a woman who's been subject to this bleeding for 12 years. Not seven days, 12 years.

12 years of exclusion. 12 years where she's not part of normal day-to-day life.

12 years where she's not welcome to come into the temple. 12 years of which surely a significant proportion have been spent without much hope of a cure. It can't take 12 whole years to examine every possibility that's open to her.

Surely a significant chunk of that time she's without hope. This is just going to be my life. And she hears about Jesus. She hears about this itinerant teacher healer.

She hears he's coming and so she takes a risk. And it is a risk if she's recognized people are going to avoid her. She normally has to keep away from the crowds.

[23 : 27] But it's worth that risk for this possibility for this glimmer of hope. And so she goes and she touches his cloak and immediately her bleeding stopped and she knew that she was freed from her suffering.

Presumably she then hopes to slip away unnoticed, unobserved, but Jesus knows. Mark says he realized power had gone out from him. And so she's on the spot and you can imagine her shame rising, can't you?

The color coming into her cheeks. Suddenly that euphoria of feeling healed, suddenly that vanishes, overtaken by this horrible realization that she's been found out. That in this busy crowd where she should not be, that all of them will know her shame.

All of them are going to be forced to assume that in the ebb and flow of bodies they have become unclean and it's her fault. contact with this outcast. So trembling with fear, she comes and she tells Jesus the truth of who she is and what she's done.

And what do you think the crowd are expecting at that point? Surely expecting anger from Jesus, aren't they? That she has dared to defile him.

[24 : 49] As far as they're concerned, her touching Jesus makes him unclean. And now he, a rabbi, a teacher, now he can't enter the temple because he's unclean.

So how will Jesus rebuke her? How will he punish her? Verse 34, he said to her, daughter, your faith has healed you.

Go in peace and be freed from your suffering. Daughter. He doesn't call her a filthy woman. He doesn't call her unclean.

He speaks to her with gracious acceptance. He speaks to her with love. He calls her daughter. Folks, that's how Jesus speaks to each of us today.

With that love, with that tenderness, speaks to us as beloved members of his own family. And says there's no longer any shame that makes us live outside the camp like those with skin diseases.

[25 : 59] We no longer have to wonder whether we're making other people unclean. Jesus is the exception that proves the rule. Instead of the uncleanness transmitted from this woman to him, instead his perfect love drives out her illness and with it drives out her impurity, her uncleanness.

She is washed clean from the inside out. Even more than he has healed her physical illness, Jesus has taken away her shame.

And he is still in that same business today. He takes our shame. Folks, whether you feel shame in your bodily discharges or not, there are actually things of which we should rightly be ashamed.

shame. Jones, she suggests there might be merit in allowing that now misplaced sense of shame at the arrival of one's period, allowing that feeling of shame, allowing it to prompt a consideration of the other natural things of which actually we should be ashamed because they are so profoundly unnatural, they are so profoundly wrong, they are in fact sinful.

our sense of self-importance that holds others in contempt, our prejudice, our lack of true compassion for the suffering of others, the uncleanness that rises from within and that taints all that we do.

[27 : 27] Jesus said what comes out of a person is what defiles them, for it is from within out of a person's heart that evil thoughts come. Sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly.

All these evils come from inside and defile a person. It is good for us to look and recognize again our shame, to see how sinful we are when these things arise from within us.

Maybe the words of Isaiah 64 are familiar to you. All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.

We all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind our sins sweep us away. Now what's not immediately clear in the polite phrasing of our English translations is the nature of these rags in the second line.

While our translations render us filthy, it is more properly speaking menstrual. our righteous acts, our best deeds, the best you and I can conjure is blood stained rags.

[28 : 47] But Jesus takes away not only our sin but also our uncleanness. Jesus takes that shame, whether it is rightly felt or not, Jesus takes that shame upon himself.

In Christ, God himself, the holy God who dwells in unapproachable light, in Christ God has called us sons and daughters.

Because Jesus' blood has been shed, there is no shame in the shedding of your blood. In place of our righteous deeds like blood stained rags, well here is John's vision from Revelation 7.

I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count. From every nation, tribe, people, and language standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

These are they who have come out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. The blood of Jesus washes away bloody stains.

[30 : 04] The blood of Jesus washes away sinful shame. The blood of Jesus is your hope day by day and on into eternity. The blood of Jesus cleanses us.

Praise God. Hallelujah. Amen.