

Jesus Died For Me (5): The Red Heifer

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- [0 : 0 0] Turn with me, please, this morning to Numbers chapter 19. Numbers chapter 19.
- And let's pray for the Lord's help as we approach this throne of grace. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory, our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- Amen. Do you have any idea at all of how far God will go to save you from all your sins?
- Or perhaps I should say it like this. Do you have any idea at all of how far God has gone to save you from your sins?
- He has given his one and only son to the death of the cross. Jesus, our sacrifice of atonement, making peace between God and us by removing the obstacle of our sin.
- [1 : 1 6] Do you know how much God loves you? Really loves you. Not only did he give his son on the cross to die for you, but time and time again through the pages of his word, he provides examples and demonstrations of what the death of his son means.
- One such example is the almost sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah. Another is that of the Passover lamb. Another, the scapegoat of the Jewish day of atonement.
- He gives us the Lord's Supper, the visible demonstration, through bread and wine, of the dying of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in Numbers 19, he demonstrates and models how much he loves us through the sacrifice and the slaughter of the red heifer.
- It's a gruesome chapter, as Stephen rightly said, but then the cross of Jesus was even worse. But in its gruesomeness, we have a sacramental vision of the love of God for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.
- Now, if I'm being honest, even though I grew up beside a working farm, I didn't really ever know what a heifer was, other than its use as a slang insult for a stout young woman.
- [2 : 5 3] In my part of the world, we called it a heifer, when actually it should be pronounced heifer. According to the dictionary, a heifer is a young cow, especially one that's not had a calf.
- Now, I guess I should have known that, given that the field right beside my parents' house when I was growing up was filled with heifers. But a heifer is a young cow, especially one which has not had a calf.
- I remember in my distant past, hearing a sermon about the red heifer taken from this chapter. But if I'm being honest, confession time here, I slept through it all.
- So I'm none the wiser for what I heard. Well, the issue being dealt with here in Numbers 19 is this. At this time, the people of Israel are wandering through the desert from their time of slavery in Egypt to the promised land of Canaan.
- In the center of their encampment was a temporary structure called the Tent of Meeting, or as the older folk among us might know it, the Tabernacle.
- [4 : 0 8] God had promised to live in this Tent of Meeting. And that is the meeting envisaged by this name, Tent of Meeting, the meeting between God and man at this place.
- Now, God is infinitely holy. And by virtue of we being sinners, we are unholy. He is pure. We are impure.

He is clean. We are unclean. How then can a holy God meet with unholy people? How can a God of whom we learn He is of pure eyes than can behold sin dwell with sinful men and women like the Israelites and like us?

The answer is that our sin must be taken away. Our impurities, our defilements must be removed. We must be forgiven.

We cannot make our own way to God by pretending that we have nothing of which to be ashamed. For even the most righteous and moral people on the outside have unclean hearts.

[5 : 26] in his book *The Contemporary Christian* which we're studying in our staff meetings at the moment on a Tuesday morning, John Stott tells the story of Jan Hammersholt, the Secretary of the United Nations from 1953 to 1961.

In his autobiography called *Markings*, Hammersholt, known by his contemporaries as an upright, compassionate, and good man spoke of and I quote that dark counterculture of evil in our nature.

That dark counterculture of evil in our nature. Yes, that's of, that's what we need to be forgiven and changed so that we sinners may be right with a holy God.

That dark counterculture, not sure how counterculture it is, that dark counterculture of evil in our nature. We pretend we don't have it.

In fact, our society goes to the extent of perhaps even taking pride now in that dark counterculture of evil in our nature. We deny it by accepting it and then by normalizing it.

[6 : 44] Our selfishness and our greed, our rebellion and our lovelessness, we drink it away, we work it away, we play it away, we psychologize it away, but all the time it is still there in the words of Hammersholt, that dark counterculture of evil in our nature.

Now, the particular expression of that impurity being dealt with in this chapter, Numbers 19, is the defilement of a person who comes into contact with a dead body.

Now, remember, at that time, Israel was a wandering people and many of the laws laid down at that time were concerned with community health and hygiene.

The touching of a dead body brought defilement and temporary banishment from the camp. Dirty things don't belong in a clean place. Defilement does not belong with divinity.

And so, for a short time, a person who had had contact with a dead body had to stay outside the camp of the Israelites. We might call it here to self-isolate outside the camp.

[8 : 02] Only after a period of time, could he return. And in this chapter, God is providing a solution to the problem of the uncleanness, impurity, and defilement of those who touch a dead body.

The solution consists in the offering of a heifer, remember, a young cow which has never had a calf, which is to be sacrificed and slaughtered outside the camp on their behalf.

This young female cow is taken outside and it's gruesomely butchered. Its ashes, after it's been burned, are mixed with water and that water is to be sprinkled onto a defiled person, thereby making them clean.

Let me read you verses 11 and 12. Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean for seven days. He must self-isolate for seven days.

He shall cleanse himself with water on the third day and on the seventh day and so be clean. That water being the water which is mixed with the ashes of the sacrificed heifer.

[9 : 17] So in that water of cleansing, in that water containing the ashes of the heifer, thrown or sprinkled or poured upon that defiled person, there is forgiveness and there is removal of all impurity and defilement.

Everything that would keep him from a living, loving relationship with God. Now if you've been tuning in over the last five Sundays, you will know that the theme on Sunday mornings during the summer has been Jesus died for me.

The Old Testament doctrine of the substitutionary atoning death of Christ. And here again therefore in this sacrifice and slaughter of the red heifer, we have a theatric demonstration of how the death of Jesus on the cross removes all our sins and restores us to a living relationship with the living God.

On that cross, Jesus bore all our impurities. Outside the city walls of Jerusalem, Jesus was sacrificed to take away all our sins and defilements, everything that was an obstacle to a living relationship with the living God.

He was slaughtered to restore us to the God who loves us, made us for himself because it is only in him we will realize our full potential as human beings made in his image.

[10 : 59] And so amidst the gruesomeness of this chapter, the hideousness of the slaughter of the red heifer, and the misery of Calvary, I want you to see the glory of divine forgiveness and the immensity and majesty of God's love for us in the giving of his son for us.

Jesus died for me. Now there are two aspects of the red heifer sacrifice in Numbers 19 I want to draw your attention to.

Keep the text open before you, open your phone, look at the text, or if you have your Bible with you, open it up at the chapter, take a look. First, the sacrifice was blameless, and second, the sacrifice was butchered.

Sacrifice was blameless, sacrifice was butchered. Our chapter begins with the words, tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come.

Now, the commentators are unclear on why this young cow had to be red. Perhaps it's because red is the color of blood, and for sure the ceremony that was to be carried out would end up very bloody indeed.

[12 : 34] But perhaps there is more. The Jewish scholars who first translated the Old Testament into the Greek language used a specific word for red.

They could have used many other words for red, but they used a specific word for red. That word from which we get our English word, fiery. That which pertains to flame, burning, red, flame, red, fire, burning, sacrifice.

They're all linked words suggesting that perhaps the red heifer was chosen because it was to remind the people of God that the young cow was to be sacrificed to take away all their defilement and uncleanness before God.

But for me the best answer consists in how the word red in the original Hebrew language is the word Adam, from which we get the name Adam, the name of the first man.

It means red in Hebrew. Could it be that God is reminding the wandering Israelites of Adam and Eve and how it was Adam's sin which necessitates the sacrifice of sin offerings like these?

[14 : 06] every son or daughter of Adam and that means all of us need a sacrifice to take our uncleanness away.

We need the redness of the blood of the sacrifice of God's own son to cover over the darkness and ugliness of our transgressions.

So the redness of the heifer reminds the people of how seriously God takes sin and therefore their need of a sacrifice to take it all away.

That's why the heifer was red and not white or brown or black. Now we're told three things about the red heifer that's to be brought for the sacrifice.

First it was to be without defect. Second it was to have no blemish. I think we get the general idea here. It was to be a perfect specimen, a perfect example of everything a young female cow should be.

[15 : 19] And then thirdly it was never to have had a yoke ever put on it. In other words it was never to have served another master as a beast of burden.

It was to be dedicated entirely to God from the moment of its birth. None other just God. In everything really in many ways this perfect heifer was to be everything the people of God were not.

It was to be without defect having no blemish. much. By contrast the people of God are defiled by their sin and by their guilt. They're unclean.

They may look fine on the outside but inside their hearts are dirty. Their gardens may all be mown to an inch of their lives and their flower beds may look wonderful but in the house it's somewhat different.

There's argument and fight. they may look fine on the inside. On the outside rather but on the inside their hearts are dirty.

[16 : 35] Is that you today? Fine on the outside? Tickety-boo. But you know that on the inside your heart is burdened down with guilt and shame at the things you have done and the person you have been.

It may not be your constant cry but in the dark hours of the night where you wake up your mind starts working and you know exactly what King David meant when he said in Psalm 51 my transgressions are always before me.

The young cow was never to have served two masters. masters. It was from birth to have been dedicated entirely to the service of God. And again can anyone say that's true of any of us?

That we have never served two masters. But from the moment of our birth our hearts have been singularly devoted to God. Or rather is it not true that even the most mature Christians among us have hearts filled with mixed motives.

Stretching from the glory of God to our own personal satisfaction. Stretching from living for God to living for self.

[18 : 04] Well indeed this perfect heifer to be offered as a bloody sacrifice on that fiery altar on account of our defilement and uncleanness was to be everything we are not.

And then we see Jesus. The Jesus of whom it said in 1 Peter 1.9 19 rather that he was a lamb without spot and blemish.

Of whom it said in Hebrews 9.14 that he offered himself to God without defect. the Jesus who said of himself in Hebrews 10.7 Behold I have come to do your will O God.

The red heifer is a young female cow but Jesus is the fulfillment of the blameless imagery of numbers 19.

The Jesus in whom there is no moral defect. The Jesus in whom there was only ever perfect love and righteousness both toward man and toward God from the very beginning.

[19 : 29] The Jesus who was entirely dedicated not to his own purposes but to those of his father which in love was to save a people for himself.

The Jesus whom his father offered on the cross was perfect in every way. Look through the gospels study them carefully and tell me can you find any fault in anything he ever said or anything he ever did.

Not only can you find no fault in him there is nothing he did which he could have done better. There is nothing he said which he could not have said better.

He could not have loved us more than he did. He could not have shown more compassion and more pity. He could not have been more obedient to the law and the faithfulness of its grace and mercy.

I challenge you find fault with Jesus. Could any have done more good than he this is the great New Testament sacrifice.

[20 : 40] He is our majestically blameless Lord Jesus Christ. A savior incarnate to offer himself up for the sins of Adam's folk for you for me.

The red heifer was blameless first of all. And then second the red heifer was butchered. Butchered. This chapter numbers 19 in common with many chapters from the first five books of the this was to be a sacrifice and offering outside the camp where those defiled by sin belong.

This blameless sacrifice offered for all of God's unclean people. And when the people of God saw all this happening they were to think to themselves see how terrible is the price of my sin.

that heifer is being butchered it's being slaughtered let's not put too fine a point in it. And all the time the people of God as they watched were to think to themselves that young cow is paying the price of my defilement and my sin.

That heifer is my substitute before God. My sufferings are it to endure. It's slaughter my slaughter it's it's to bear.

[22 : 48] And when they saw that blood being shed and that smoke from the fire going up from outside the camp the people of God trusted that their sins and their defilements and their uncleannesses were all being taken away.

This young cow this heifer it died in their place as their substitute. They saw it and they shuddered.

And so we go back to the beginning again. Do you know can you understand now how far God will go in order to reconcile you to himself to save you from your sins to give you eternal life?

Did you ever really think did these people ever really think that the sacrifice of a young cow with no moral cognitive ability could ever be sufficient for the removal of their sin?

The hymn writer Isaac Watts once wrote these wonderful words. He said not all the blood of bulls and goats on Jewish altars slain could give the guilty conscience peace or wash away its stain.

[24 : 11] Not one red heifer not one million red heifers could do that. Instead God gave his one and only son.

Led outside the city walls of Jerusalem by the chief priests and the elders of the people the Romans nailed him to a cross. They crushed him.

They slaughtered him. They executed him. He the perfect fulfillment of all the million million animal sacrifices could never achieve.

Or a young cow might be precious to its owner but not even a tiny bit as precious as a son. This is how far God the father in his great love for us was willing to go to reconcile us to himself to remove from us the defilement and uncleanness of our sin.

He led his innocent righteous and blameless son outside the city walls of Jerusalem and sacrificed him on a cross for us.

[25 : 27] When I was a good bit younger before I got married I was even though I say it myself a pretty good golfer.

On one occasion I was due to play against a rather wealthy Englishman who had gained much of his wealth by gambling. He was so fiercely competitive that he refused to play against me unless there was something to be gained or lost.

He wanted to play for money. Now I knew that he was not really very good at golf. He had all the best golf clubs and all the best golf gear but I knew it was all a bit of show really.

And therefore if he played against me I stood to earn a lot of money. He suggested to me that we play for £100 a hole.

Now at the time I was a poor student the offer was very tempting indeed. One round of golf could have paid off all my debt or bought me a new car.

[26 : 41] But as a Christian I knew it was wrong of me to gamble and so I said to him I remember this I said you realise that this round of golf might cost you a lot of money.

I'll never forget his words in reply. He replied you'd be surprised at how much I'm willing to lose. You'd be surprised at how much I'm willing to lose.

That phrase from that foolish man who ended up refusing to play has stuck in my head ever since then. You'd be surprised at how much I'm willing to lose.

You see I can't help thinking that when it comes to our salvation from sin and misery our freedom from slavery and captivity our life from death and darkness the father points to his crucified son and says you'd be surprised at how much I'm willing to lose.

The eternal joy of infinitely satisfying fellowship with his only son exchanging the glory of heaven for the dirt of Calvary because of his great love for us God gave his beloved son to the butchery of the cross so that all our defilements and all our sins might be taken away.

[28 : 15] Jan Hammershould the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 through 61 spoke of and I quote that dark counterculture of evil in our nature.

Jesus the perfectly beloved son of God altogether without blemish or without defect defied his culture and died on account of our dark evil culture.

He my substitute dying outside the camp on my behalf pure for the impure the clean for the unclean the sinless for the sinful and all to reconcile us to God.

Now as we close this sermon and the whole series on substitutionary atonement we want to ask the question how can what Jesus did on the cross 2000 years ago become mine today?

How can it become mine? It's all very well to know the stories of Abraham and Isaac the Passover Lamb the Levitical sacrifices the scapegoat and the red heifer it's all very well to know these stories but there's a huge difference between knowing the stories and experiencing for yourself the benefit of all Jesus has done on the cross by dying as your substitute.

[30 : 00] Well according to this chapter when that red heifer had been slaughtered it was burned and then its ashes were mixed with water whenever someone became unclean a branch of hyssop notice how often hyssop appears when it comes to sacrifices a branch of hyssop was dipped into that water containing the ashes of the sacrifice and the water was sprinkled onto them uncleanness was removed as the water containing the ashes of the sacrifice was sprinkled onto the sinner in the same way we are cleansed from our sin as the blood of Christ sprinkles our hearts how then does what Jesus did on the cross 2000 years ago become mine it is as I pray through the words of

Psalm 51 verse 7 purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean wash me and I shall be whiter than the snow it is as we pray God to sprinkle our hearts with the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ that God forgives our sins to the Jesus who died on the cross as our substitute to reconcile us to his father in heaven this is how far God will go to save you from your sins this is how far he'll go how then will you respond to all these images of his loving grace how then will you answer the gospel call to come to the banquet of the grace of Christ for all has been made ready for you let us pray