

'Cleansed from death'

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[0:00] Chapter of Numbers 19. Well, Rihanna said at the start that we're going to be talking about death.

! And there is something about death, isn't it? that makes us all want to avoid or stay away from it. And I don't mean the fact that you don't want to die, which I take it is a given, hopefully. But the fact that, for example, I don't know about you, but if you see a roe kill or a dead possum on your daily walk, I don't know, we don't tend to walk over it, do we? We don't tend to go near it. In fact, we try and take a wide berth of it, isn't it? Or, I'm assuming, you rarely hang out at cemeteries?

Especially after dark? No? Yes? And unless you're a medic, we hardly come into contact with death, do we?

[1:12] When someone we love dies, we even sort of outsource it to the funeral director to prepare the body for us. And that's, I think, because we know instinctively that death is the opposite to life.

Even though we know that coming into contact with a dead person is not going to impact our lifespan at all, we sort of desire to disassociate with death as much as we can.

And such a view, actually, is common across all cultures in the world. And their roots actually go all the way back to ancient practices. And so, that's the case with Israel here as well, except that God reveals through His laws the true nature of death and its relationship with Him.

Now, you see, the Bible teaches that God is the author of all life. And when physical death occurs, it's because God has stopped sustaining what was once a living thing, whether it's a plant, an animal, or a human.

And over the last few weeks, we've seen as well that God also sometimes uses premature death as a judgment against sin, particularly grievous ones like rebellion against Him.

[2:34] Now, if you go all the way back to Genesis, of course, you'll see that the origins of death did not arise during the seven days of creation.

The world God created was initially without death because there was no sin. Adam and Eve lived forever in the garden.

But when they rebelled against God and sinned against Him, death came as part of the curse. Adam and Eve were physically banished from the garden and barred from the tree of life.

And so, while death is a natural part of our world and we see it all the time, there is something deeply unnatural about it. Death exists only because sin does.

And God, as the author of life, is therefore the very antithesis of death. He rightly disassociates himself with it. Yes, as creator, He makes alive and He kills, but death itself is alien to His nature.

[3:45] Where God is, there also is life. And death, the absence of life, is actually an indication of God's absence. And so, I think this forms the premise for what we've heard today in Numbers chapter 19.

Death is considered unclean by God because it is the antithesis of life, of who He is, and so contaminates His presence as the author of life.

Now, those of you who have been fooling, I think it was last year, back in Numbers chapter 5 verse 2, we are already told that one of the things which compromised purity in the camp was coming into contact with dead bodies.

Such a person, it says there, becomes ceremonially unclean and must be sent outside the camp.

And the recent events of Numbers 17 has actually changed this situation quite dramatically.

Because no longer is, you know, one or two people dying here and there every other week kind of thing. As a result of the plague, it says that more than 14,700 people died on the one day.

[4:54] And so, imagine how many people would have been made unclean by this, right? Because, you know, your family member has just died, you have to handle the body. All of a sudden, you know, it's almost as if no one left in the camp would be clean.

Everyone would be sent out. And so, I think Numbers 19 here is yet another gracious provision from God to enable the camp to still continue to function, and more importantly, to allow God to keep dwelling in their midst, notwithstanding the contamination that has been caused by death.

Now, some of you know your Bibles pretty well, and you might be thinking, oh, there wasn't another incident in Exodus that was similar, where there was a plague as well around the time of the golden calf. Why is that any different?

Well, I think in that case, nothing was provided because, if you read in Exodus, the tent was still outside the camp. It was only when the tabernacle was built that it was located in the midst of the camp to symbolize that God was dwelling in their midst.

So, the alternative now that God provides is what I call the use of a cleansing agent, a detergent, spiritual detergent if you like. And reading between the lines, I think it means that those who are unclean by way of contact with the dead can still remain in camp to be purified rather than have to wait it out outside.

[6:19] So, if you look on the next slide, chapter 19 has been divided by me into two sections. The first, 1 to 10, is about the preparation of this cleansing agent.

And then, 11 to 22 is about describing the process for applying it. So, let's begin in verse 1, where the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, this is a requirement of the Lord that the Lord has commanded. Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish that has never been under a yoke. And so, like other animals brought for sacrifice, the heifer, which is a female cow, if you didn't know, is to be perfect.

Never worked, that is, hasn't carried the yoke. That's what the yoke is, the thing that goes between the animals. And both of these things indicate or symbolize the purity of this animal.

Reading, 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 his blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the tent.

[7:26] Now, of course, now they're outside the camp, so pretty far from the tent. But this act of sprinkling seven times is what occurs with the other sacrifices as well.

So, this time it is only done in the direction of the tent. But in all of these cases, it's to signify that this is being offered to God at the altar, as though this heifer was there physically at the altar, even though it doesn't make it there.

Afterwards, the animal, once killed, is burnt and the ashes used to make the cleansing agent. Verse 5. And while he watches, that's the priest, the heifer is to be burnt.

It's hide flesh, blood and intestines. The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool, and throw them onto the burning heifer. Now, people are not quite sure why these extra ingredients are added.

Some have said perhaps it's to create a bit of a perfume, you know, like you put lavender into your soap. This is cedar wood into the ashes as well. They've also noted that, unlike the other sacrifices, the fat here is not mentioned.

[8:34] And so, some have said that perhaps the fat is not being burnt, but is reserved, set aside, to be used as some sort of coagulating agent, right? So that when you add it to the ashes, you get a sort of a solid mixture.

Which to me, I'm not sure, but it kind of makes sense, because when we read later that the ashes are to be stored outside the camp, well, it's going to be less easily blown away if it's not in powder form, right?

Anyway, the main thing to note here is that there are three people required for the process, right? First, the priest who slaughters and sprinkles.

Then the second clean person to burn the heifer. And then the third to gather and store the ashes. But all three of them become unclean by handling the heifer in some way or form.

And that's because they have come into contact with death, whether slaughtering, the burning, or the gathering of the ashes. And so the instructions from 7 to 10 is that they need to then wash their clothes and for the first to bathe themselves.

[9:40] So the priest, verse 7, must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. Likewise, the man who burns must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean until evening.

The third man who gets the ashes, verse 10, only needs to wash his clothes and bathe with water. Is that right? No, next slide. Bath, wash his clothes, yep.

And he doesn't need to bathe himself. But he also is unclean until the evening. So what they do is that they wash with water, verse 9, because that is not used to the ashes, because the ashes are being kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing.

It is for purification from sin. Now how this is prepared and applied, we'll get to in verse 17. But note the cleansing action, if you can go back, Roger, to that verse, yep.

The one with, yep, that's one. The water of cleansing, it says there, is for purification from sin. So even though death does not cause you to sin, just being unclean, the actual action of cleansing is actually for purification from sin, because as I said, there's a connection between death and sin.

[11:06] Now, notice as well that the three are washed, but they remain unclean. And this is important because, next slide, verse 22, it gives us the clue that they then need to be careful who and what they touch until the evening.

Right? Because anything they touch will become unclean, or any person that touches them will be unclean too. Okay, let's move on to the second section, verses 11 onwards, because here we are given instructions as to how to then apply these ashes, or the water, and on whom.

So verse 11 tells us how long a person is unclean for. Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days. And this is the first time I think we know how long.

And then in verses 14 to 16, we're told that it doesn't matter how this contact has come about.

Could have happened out in the open, could have happened in a tent, could have been because someone was killed or they died naturally, it doesn't matter.

All of this makes them unclean. And I want to differentiate this contact directly with the dead as direct contamination. Because later on, as we saw in verse 22, indirect contamination occurs when this unclean person then touches other things.

[12:22] The other things and the other people are indirectly contaminated. Not directly, because they didn't touch the dead body. And that's why when they're only indirectly contaminated, all they need to do is wait until the evening.

It doesn't seem to be that they need to apply the water of cleansing. And they're not unclean for seven days. But with those who are directly contaminated, next slide, 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. And if you read this, I think here's another reason why this is all being done inside the camp.

And those who are unclean don't need to actually go out because it says that their failure to purify themselves defiles the Lord's tabernacle. Now, if you think about this, people are being sent out originally to outside of the camp so that they will not be in the Lord's presence and therefore not defile the tabernacle.

[13:42] However, here, if there is a possibility of an unclean person still defiling the Lord's tabernacle, I think it suggests then, therefore, that what they've done is they've remained in the camp and then failed to purify themselves through this process.

But the consequence, regardless of how you think about it, is that the punishment is severe. They are to be cut off or they are to be killed is another way.

It's a euphemism for being killed, really. And so, jumping to verse 17, we're now given then the instructions on how to then fabricate and use the cleansing agent.

It says, So, it takes a clean person to administer the water to an unclean person, but then not only unclean person, but anything that has been unclean.

So, the tent, the furnishings, anything that has touched the human, dead human body or the human person who has been contaminated, all of those things need to be made clean.

[15 : 20] Now, this is repeated on the third and seventh days. And I think the third day is a practical thing. Just my guess, but if you imagine, when a person dies, you know, the family members sort of need to touch the body, right?

They have to prepare the body. Take it, wrap it, put an anointing oil or whatever on it. And so, I think that process itself will take a couple of days, all right?

And so, it's only on the third day that you can sort of apply this sprinkling so that the people that were contaminated, made unclean, don't need to then handle the body any longer, right?

Because otherwise, you do the sprinkling and then they touch it again. That starts the seven days again. So, the three days, I think, is a kind of practical thing. And then the seventh day is to complete the whole process.

Okay. That's really all there is to that passage. So, it's not, it's quite descriptive. It doesn't say a lot about the symbolism about it. So, how are we then to take it?

[16 : 25] How are we to understand it? Well, I think there are two principles which are in your outline. The first principle, I think, is to see from this whole process how contaminating death is and portrayed to us as.

Because they're like germs, isn't it? It spreads from mere contact. Contamination spreads just from mere contact. And the sad reality is that actually there is no way of containing the spread of the contamination.

Because when somebody has just died, someone has to handle the corpse, right? You can't just leave it there, right? You don't want to leave it there, right?

Not good. So, someone has to touch it. And as a result of that, someone will be contaminated by death. Someone living will be contaminated by death. And, you know, in some ways, that's a pointer to just what sin is like.

Because sin itself spreads. It's infectious almost. And throughout history, people have tried all sorts of ways to try and keep themselves pure.

[17 : 34] Right? They have separated themselves from the world, gone into a monastery or something. They have lived in communes. But if you ever hear stories about people living in communes, it's sort of the hotbed for courts to start.

Right? So, it's never worked because sin ultimately resides in all humans, all of us. That's why we're all subject to death.

No amount of self-control or discipline has successfully kept anyone or any community totally free from sin. But the second principle we discover is that even as death contaminates everything and everyone, death is also God's way of making an unclean person clean.

Because if you think about it, God could have said, you know, Moses, take some honey and pour the water in it. Use that. Or take, you know, some petals of a rose, a nice smelling flower, and use that as the water.

But no, he didn't say that, did he? He said, use the ashes of a heifer. That is, something wholesome had to die as a substitute in order to purify an unclean person.

[18 : 55] Death contaminates, but death also purifies. God also uses death to purify. And both of these principles, I think, help us to understand how this passage applies to us today.

Now, if you remember last week, I said that if ever there was a New Testament reference to an Old Testament passage, then it sort of helps us to understand how to apply it as well, isn't it, as Christians.

And it just so happens that this very chapter is being referenced in Hebrews 9, verse 11 to 15, which Yahi read for us. And what we discover there is that the writer of Hebrews says that these laws that are being described here in Numbers 19 are only effective in making a person ceremonially clean.

So yes, it enables someone to come back into the camp, to draw near to the tabernacle, the earthly one, and worship the Lord. But really, the place that we all want to enter is where God truly is.

Not at an earthly tabernacle, but in His heavenly sanctuary. And for that, what's needed is not the ashes of heifer, but the blood of Jesus shed on the cross.

[20 : 08] And so, Hebrews 9, 11 to 13 says this, But when Christ came as High Priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands.

That is to say, not part of this creation. He did not enter by means of blood of goats and cows, but He entered the most holy place once for all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean, that's this chapter here, sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

And I would add, only outwardly clean. But can you see the comparison that the writer is making? And I've got a table for that. It's not an earthly tabernacle that we're trying to come to, but the perfect one in heaven where God's spiritual presence is.

Not with the ashes of heifer, but with His own blood, the blood of Jesus, which doesn't just cleanse outwardly and ceremonially, but cleanse our consciences, which we'll get to in a minute.

[21 : 24] So that we are spared not from physical death, but redeemed from eternal death. We have eternal redemption.

Because what we're trying to do is not remain in a camp, but we're trying to enter the most holy place, God's eternal presence.

Friends, Israel's problem in Numbers 19 was physical death. But as I said, it was an indication of the presence of sin in all humanity.

And sin, at its heart, is not a physical problem, but a spiritual one. Because it concerns our relationship with God.

You know, you may be here today seeking the truth about God, but the true barrier to knowing Him is not an intellectual one. Lily as well shared in her testimony.

[22 : 22] It's not because you're not smart enough that you don't know God. It's not because there is not enough evidence. Yes, there are intellectual questions to ask and then answer. But ultimately, the barrier is spiritual.

The problem lies with our hearts, not our heads. It's a spiritual problem of the heart, that sin.

And if you know, physical solutions can't fix spiritual problems, right? Just by way of comparison, you know, parents trying to fix their relationship with their children by giving them more money, when really what they need is more time and understanding, right?

You want to give money a physical thing to solve a relational problem? It doesn't work. And so that's the same with sin, isn't it? Physical solutions don't work.

It's the same actually with the baptism by water today, right? For Lily. The physical part, the water, is just symbolic. As Jeff has already said, what really matters is the spiritual part, repentance of sin and confession of faith in Jesus.

[23 : 37] Without those things, the water here is useless. And so while the ashes cleanse outwardly and allow Israel to come back into the camp, they can't bring them or us into God's holy presence, which is not at the tabernacle, but in heaven.

The solution, therefore, has to be spiritual. And I think deep down, you know, we know, right, the weight of sin and the weight of it on our conscience.

You know, we can try and hide our sin and our guilt from other people, and we all get very good at that. But our conscience, when we know we've done the wrong thing, continues to eat away at us, doesn't it?

We can't shake it off. You know, we try and be a better person. We try and make amends. But it doesn't take that away, does it? We can't change the past.

Only what Jesus has done on the cross can truly fix our spiritual problems. Because what he did was spiritual in nature. And let me show you how that is, verse 14.

[24 : 46] It says, How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.

And so if you look at that verse, Christ didn't just offer his body physically. He offered it through the eternal spirit.

In other words, when he died on the cross, it was not just a physical act. It was a spiritual offering, so that our consciences are truly cleansed from the guilty acts that should have led to our death.

And so as I said earlier, death and sin contaminates everything and everyone everywhere, but it is also the death of Jesus, a pure and unblemished sacrifice, that alone can cleanse us fully from sin.

Now, back in chapter 19, the ashes of the heifer are available to all. It says there that you can use it for the Israelite or the resident or the foreigner in our midst.

[25 : 57] But the ashes of the heifer sits in a pile outside the camp. It doesn't just cover anyone unclean, right? Oh, it's there, everyone's now clean. No, if you want the ashes to work for you, you need to send a clean person out there, get a jar, put some of it in there, bring it in, put the water in, and then sprinkle it.

You need to apply it on the unclean person in order for it to work on that person. And that's the same with Jesus' death and life as well.

His death on the cross happened 2,000 years ago. It's a reality, all right? Whether you like it or not, it happened. But it's only of benefit for you if you will apply it to yourself.

Receive it by faith. Respond. Metaphorically, take Jesus' blood and spiritually sprinkle it on us. Otherwise, it doesn't do anything for you.

And Hebrews 10, verse 19 to 22 describes it this way. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, that is, Jesus has died, we can be confident.

[27 : 09] But verse 22, we need to respond. It says, let us draw near. The act of drawing near is our response with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

Having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. So the response there is to draw near, number one, with a sincere heart.

That is, repentant, humble, desiring of God. And then, with the full assurance that faith brings.

Exercising, believing in Jesus and saying, His death is effective for me.

And then the result is our hearts are sprinkled spiritually so that we are cleansed. But look there, it's even better than that, isn't it? Because when we are saved, it's not just our soul and our spirit that's saved.

It says there that our bodies are washed with pure water as well. In other words, even though the problem is spiritual and the solution is spiritual, the salvation is complete.

[28 : 10] Not just our spirit is saved, but our bodies are saved as well. We will have new bodies in eternity. That's a wonderful thing, isn't it?

You're not going to be a soul floating around. You will have Jesus' new and resurrected body as part of your salvation. Now friends, I don't know about you, but I think one of the most wonderful things about being a Christian is that we can live this life with a cleansed conscience.

Do you know what that means? Do you know how that feels as an experience? Because a cleansed conscience is saying that I can live this life, not because I'm perfect, but because I'm forgiven.

That even though I know I'm prone to failure and weakness, I don't have to be guilty. I can come before God confident because of the blood of Jesus, cleansed.

So friends, if you've not experienced this before, let me invite you to draw near to God to receive this gift, which comes only through faith in Jesus. Now, there are others of you I know that have been a Christian for a while, and yet I sense that sometimes you continue to live your life with the burden of guilt in your life, on your shoulders.

[29 : 36] And friends, if that is you, then let me tell you, you don't have to. God's promise here in Hebrews is that we can have full assurance that faith brings, right?

In other words, when we put our trust in Jesus, we can know for sure that everything is wiped clean. The past, things that we can't even change or make amends for.

We don't have to carry that burden because Jesus has. And so we can live life with a cleansed conscience. And so if you're a Christian and you're still carrying that weight on your shoulders, then please come and talk to me.

Let me help you. Let me talk it through with you so that you can come, you know, you can come before God freely, but then you can also live your life freely without having to keep thinking, Ah, what did I do?

How can I make that? How can I change that? How can I undo all that? You don't have to. Because the blood of Jesus has been sprinkled to make your conscience clean.

[30 : 47] Let's pray. Father, we thank you that we are free because we are redeemed from eternal death by the blood of Jesus.

Help us to draw near with confidence to be cleansed of our guilty conscience so that we can live confidently by faith in your eternal presence.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.