

Title: The red heifer - Numbers 19

Purpose: A very distinctive and somewhat unique symbol-laden ceremony for bringing about spiritual cleansing from the stain of our sin and uncleanness. From this particular lens we get a powerful window to Christ, we also get a power reminder of the constant need we have for cleansing from the contaminating influence of sin.

INTRODUCTION

Can't escape from DIRT

There a few things in life that, however hard you might try, you can't really escape from AND one of these is **DIRT**.

Just keeping one single house clean is a never ending task and one that you don't ever really get on top of.

The washing up

Talking of domestic chores - take washing up:

One man (Nathanael Hawthorne - American novelist) writing about his experience while his wife was away (and this was in fact written back in the 1800's) had this to say:

"**The washing of dishes** does seem to me the most absurd and unsatisfactory business that I ever undertook.

If, when once washed, they would remain clean forever and ever (which they ought in all reason to do, considering how much trouble it is), there would be less occasion to grumble; but no sooner is it done, than it requires to be done again.

On the whole, I have come to the resolution not to use more than one dish at each meal."

The fact of the matter is that we spend a very large amount of our lives simply "dealing with dirt" - whether that be putting clothes into the washing machine, putting dishes into the dishwasher or just getting out the face flannel of a morning!!

Managing the dirt

Q. So what can be done? Q. What do we tend to do about it?

Well what we do, in simple terms, is that we get very **STRATEGIC IN HOW WE DEAL WITH IT**.

We have **at least a couple of approaches** to keeping things manageable:

- **ONE APPROACH** - is to carefully **control the frequency** at which we think something needs to be cleaned.

Perhaps we say that a shirt can be worn for 2 days - surely we reckon that after a day something (although it is dirty) is ***NOT*** "TOO DIRTY"!

- **ANOTHER WAY** - is to carefully **control the sources of contamination**.

So we could adopt Hawthorne's approach making sure that we heavily limit the number of plates and pots that we

use.

This morning

Q. Now why am I talking about DIRT and CLEANING?

Well this morning we have arrived at Numbers Chapter 19 and it would have to be said that probably no other chapter in the whole Bible has more to say about the subject of CLEANING and DIRT than this chapter.

If you do a quick counting exercise for words such as:

- wash
- bathe
- clean
- purify
- cleanse
- defile
- unclean etc.

You would discover that the word count in this single chapter of only 22 verses is around 50!!

You could imagine that this would be THE chapter for all those out there that suffer with OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER - those that are always washing their hands over and over.

DIRT and SIN

Now clearly this chapter here in Number 19 which was read for us earlier on - is *NOT* just about hygiene and things being spick and span.

No the cleanness and in particular lack of cleanness - that is being focussed on here is that which exists in the SPIRITUAL REALM. This is stated very clearly here in our passage - the ceremony that is being described is, as the end of Verse 9 puts it: **"for purification from SIN."**

Images for SIN

Now the bible, in teaching about various topics, likes to make a lot of use of images. God knows that we learn a lot better when we are able to visualise things in our minds. And so when it comes to SIN - the bible uses a number of different pictures, for example:

- SIN is described as being a WEIGHT that is BURDENSOME
- It is pictured as being a DEBT that has to be PAID
- AND it is also portrayed as DIRT, as a STAIN that is impossible for man UNAIDED to get rid of

Now all of this does not mean that people in every age have not tried to simply MANAGE SIN, to DEAL WITH DIRT just like we do around the house.

The Pharisees

So for example **take The Pharisees in Jesus' day - they tried a couple of very human approaches:**

- FIRST - they fooled themselves into thinking that things were not really all that unclean.

They just limited their cleaning attempts to things that were dirty on the outside ignoring the uncleanness that was rampant in their hearts.

- SECOND - they tried the approach of limiting their exposure to things they thought would contaminate them.

So, for example, they would not have any conversation or even "distant dealings" with people like tax collectors OR others that were on the fringes of society.

This was Hawthorne's approach to managing the washing up - reduce the number of plates you use to the absolute minimum and then everything will be nicely managed.

Our structure

Q. So what does this chapter have to say regarding the way forward?

Q. Is there some cleansing agent, some cleaning process that will be effective for the stain of sin?

We this is what this chapter talks about and I have just two points that will hopefully bring this out:

1] A remarkable procedure

What was going on

Now right at the outset it is always helpful to understand why a chapter is where it is. And very often with a little bit of digging we can figure things out.

Numbers chapters 11 thru 18 have brought before us **a lot a disobedience and rebellion** at many levels and **God's judgment has fallen** such that the old generation (all those 20 years and above at the first census) are going to fall in the desert. And so **these 8 chapters are really the record of countless thousands of deaths.**

And so **every day people will have been burying the dead** - and one thing we have to realise is that **DEATH is the complete antithesis of everything that God stands for:**

- God represents LIFE and LIVING
- whereas SIN always issues forth in DYING and ultimately in DEATH

James in **James chapter 1** talking of **sin & temptation** says:

"... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; **and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.**"

Some this chapter is the MOST TIMELY of chapters - their great need, especially with so much uncleanness associated with dying and death, was for cleansing.

A lasting ordinance

You might think that by this time all of the spiritual provisions and laws would have been given but there is still at least one more that is now to come and this one is to be (as verse 10 and verse 21 emphasise) a LASTING ORDINANCE.

"The Ceremony in Summary"

So let me give you what we might call - "The Ceremony in Summary":

- basically they had to get a cow
- take it outside the camp
- kill it
- burn it
- collect it's ashes
- and then from that time onwards use it's ashes whenever there was a need for cleansing someone or something unclean by mixing a little bit of it with fresh water and then sprinkling it on the person a couple of times in the course of the week and then the job would be done

So that's **THE PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL**.

And expressed like that it does seem really rather random BUT AS YOU WILL PROBABLY KNOW BY NOW - **nothing with God is random** - even if on the surface it may appear that way.

God is in the details

Well as the saying goes: "God is in the details" - so let's unpack this "REMARKABLE PROCESS" as I am calling it:

- FIRST - **the cow**.

Notice that it is a RED ONE - the only place in the OT where we find this sort of cow - it is the colour of blood and as the whole system of sacrifice in the OT shows - BLOOD is a non-negotiable aspect to the CLEANSING OF SIN.

- We notice also that the cow is a HEIFER - that means it is one that is not a baby and also that it has not had a baby.

It is also a cow that has no spot OR blemish OR disfigurement in any way.

Put it plain and simple this is a prize specimen. And this is also very much in line with all the other animals that get used as part of the normal sacrificial system.

- This cow is one that has never been yoked.

Q. Now what does this mean? Well again part of it is simply that this cow is in mint condition, there's no wear or tear upon it at all.

But more than that this is picturing that this cow has had no other purpose in its life except this one that it is now fulfilling and that is to die for the purpose of cleansing others.

OKAY let's move on from the cow

- **Verse 6** speaks about **3 other cleansing ingredients** that are to be part of the mix: **CEDAR - RED WOOL & HYSSOP**.

Now although we can't be entirely certain the symbolism that these 3 bring - we can make a pretty good guess:

The cedar and the scarlet wool have a reddish hue and again re-enforce the BLOOD RED THEME.

The hyssop was the stalk and flower of a plant that made an excellent device for sprinkling - Moses used it in the tabernacle for this and in the NT it was what was used to give Jesus a drink when he hung upon the cross.

Leprosy cure

It is not accidental that when **leprosy** is discussed in the OT the cure for it **involves these three things** - and leprosy was seen **a particular symbol of SIN**.

(This was the punishment that Miriam received when she sinned against Moses just seven chapters back in [Numbers 12](#)).

So this was a very distinctive ceremony in that it was very colourful and made use of a specific animal that was not used elsewhere. Q. But what else?

- Well it seems that ***NOTHING MUCH WAS DONE IN THE NORMAL WAY***. Q. Now what do I mean?

Well there are quite a few things that make this sacrifice **"one on it own"** - something really very unique:

- Notice **WHERE** this offering is being done - it is outside the camp (everything else in the OT sacrificial system was done in the presence of God at the Tabernacle - their mobile temple).

- Notice also **WHO** is doing the offering. Everywhere else in the OT, it is the priests whose job it is to officiate - and sure enough here we have **Eleazar**, who is the representative of the High Priest Aaron (who is about to die) present. He is, if you like, **a necessary witness**, ***BUT*** the one doing the officiating is simply described in [Verse 8](#) as ["The man..."](#) or [Verse 21 "The man who sprinkles the water of cleansing..."](#)

- We need to further spot **WHAT** is happening. We know that this burning of the cow and using the ashes with fresh water is ALL ABOUT CLEANSING and PURIFICATION.

HOWEVER what we really need to notice is that the one assisting the UNCLEAN person is getting drawn in to the UNCLEANNESS. The person collecting the ashes, the person sprinkling the cleansing water is not walking away unscathed. They themselves absorb the uncleanness.

- Let's just for completeness consider the **WHO** of all this. Q. Who is this ceremony for?

Well normally a cleansing or atoning sacrifice was for a particular person, it was for a particular sin - but here this is a procedure, a provision that is FOR MANY and FOR MANY OCCASIONS.

This is a long-lasting, multi-use and mobile provision.

Apparently the amount of ash produced by burning a whole cow would be around 4kg and given ash is not that heavy it would be quite some quantity, it would last along time before they would need to have a repeat.

Something very remarkable

So I think you can see that this whole process centering around this RED HEIFER is very unique in a whole raft of ways - **ALTOGETHER YOU CAN SENSE THAT IT IS SOMETHING VERY REMARKABLE**.

Guardian article

A very recent article (August 10, 2015) in the Guardian helps us to see how special the RED HEIFER is.

They report that the Israeli's are seeking to breed the perfect Red Heifer so that it would be one more necessary step towards building once again the third temple in Jerusalem so that people when they go to that temple would be able to be properly purified!

Well - I would have to say that they are misguided - as one other article quipped:

this is none other than -> "**THE HOLY HEIFER FROM HAIFA**"!!

Well we looked at what is FIRSTLY - a remarkable procedure for removing the spiritual dirt, what is commonly called SIN.

Q. BUT are we seeing it in its fullest light?

Instant coffee NEVER AS GOOD AS THE REAL THING

You see this procedure produced ash and all you had to do was to add water and you were ready to go.

It was a bit like instant coffee add boiling water and you're ready to go.

BUT THE THING ABOUT INSTANT COFFEE - although it can taste very nice is THAT IT CAN NEVER match up to the real thing:

- it doesn't smell as good
- it doesn't look as good
- AND, in case you didn't realise, it SIMPLY DOESN'T TASTE AS GOOD AS THE REAL THING!!

So that leads us to our 2nd point - A remarkable procedure - #2:

2] A real person

Despite the fact this Red Angus, this Holy Cow is very special and distinctive - on its own it is *NOT THE REAL THING*.

As with all of the various OT artefacts, whether the tabernacle or its furnishing or whether the sacrifices they are all pointers to a greater reality.

The book of Hebrews helps to do the translation work for us, to uncover what it is that is really being pointed at - so let me read two verses from Hebrews 9 - FIRST Verse 13:

"The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them **so that they are outwardly clean**.

This is why a "Holy heifer from Haifa" is of no use - it will not cleanse them from the sin within.

And the passage in Hebrews goes on and shows us where we are to look:

(Hebrews 9 verse 14) "How much more, then (so this is the typical argument from the lesser to the greater), 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!"

Maybe you have never come across this story of the Red Heifer in Scripture.

Maybe you have never really made a clear connection between this Heifer and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me draw out the connections clearly and then to just conclude with 1 final thing:

- This sacrifice was one done outside the camp.
It was done away from God's presence - because Jesus, as He was carrying the sins of the world was shut out from the presence of God, He was put (as it were) out of sight.
Outside the camp was that place where the unclean were put and Jesus go out to them there.~
- This sacrifice was that took place on the Cross of Calvary was one done by others with just the Religious authorities the priests merely looking on - merely playing the role of witnesses. It was the Gentiles that performed the procedure.
- This sacrifice unlike so many that we see in the OT - is one that is done essentially once and is sufficient for the many.

As [Hebrews 9 Verse 28](#) says: "so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him."

- This sacrifice caused the unclean to become clean and the one clean to become unclean.

The apostle Paul expresses it like this "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

The cleansing from Sin that Christ achieves did not come without cost - Jesus had to absorb your sin - He had to become sin on your behalf. He, if you have not realised this, took your place, He did a swap with you.

- The cleansing of this sacrifice is necessary. Notice how those who would not cleanse themselves with this water - that they were to be cut off from the community. (It's there at Verse 20). There is no other way to be cleanse from the sin deep within.
- Note also that this cleansing is very thorough and is fully complete.
Notice that the sprinkling of the cleansing water was to be done on the 3rd day and the 7th day and then on the 8th day the person would be clean.

The numbers 3 and 7 are those numbers of completion and perfection.
The number 8 is one that signifies a fresh start.

When Jesus washed the disciples feet in [John 13](#) we read these words of Jesus to Peter who wanted Him to wash his whole body not just his feet and Jesus replies: "A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."

And so once we have received the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf - then we only need our feet to be cleansed - this is where we maintain the relationship with God that Jesus has procured for us.

As we read in [1 John 1 Verse 9](#) "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

A remarkable procedure

A real person

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude where we began with DIRT GLORIOUS DIRT:

We spend so much of our time trying to rid ourselves, trying to limit the effects of dirt in our lives.

But the truth is that all our efforts are worthless when it comes to the SPIRITUAL DIRT called SIN.

For this, as the song goes, "we have Jesus".

The Red Heifer in this dirtiest of chapters in our bibles Numbers 19:

- points forward to how uncleanness can be effectively dealt with
- it points forward to Jesus and the work He achieved there outside the city walls upon the cross

Q. BUT what are we to do when we are made clean once again?

Q. Why do we bother with cleansing at a practical level?

Well our Hebrews verses remind us of the answer:

Hebrews 9 verses 13-14 "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 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!"

Given God has done so much for us, in cleansing us thoroughly through Jesus Christ's work on the cross - what have we been made clean for if not to serve him.

It is the least we might do - it is the most logical thing to do by way of a simple gratitude and deep thankfulness for His deep cleansing.

Let's pray ... AMEN