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The Red Heifer

On defilement and cleansing

Numbers 19

The type of the red heifer is full of instruction for every Christian. It is found in the Book of Numbers, where the journey of the children of Israel through the wilderness is recorded. It was provided to meet defilement caused by contact with the body of a dead person, a bone or a grave. In verse 17 it is called *'the purification-offering that hath been burned'*.

To the Christian, the world is as much a spiritual wilderness as the wilderness was literally such to the children of Israel. They had to pass through it on their way to the land; we must pass through the world on our way to the heavenly Canaan. As we do so, there are many around us who are spiritually dead, and we are exposed to the lifeless, sinful things that occupy them: *'all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life'* (1 John 2:16). There is the constant danger that through a lack of watchfulness we become occupied with the same defiling things.

In Numbers 19, the children of Israel were commanded to bring a red heifer to Moses and Aaron (v. 2). This, and the other requirements that are specified about the animal, made it a suitable type of the Lord Jesus Christ. While *'the blood of goats and bulls, and a heifer's ashes sprinkling the defiled'* sanctified *'for the purity of the flesh'*, that was all they could do (Heb. 9:13). These were outward actions that had outward results, but when spiritual realities are before us only the death of Christ can truly meet our need.

The red heifer: a type of Christ

The red color of the heifer, the color of blood, reminds us that Christ came *'not by water only, but by water and blood'* (1 John 5:6). He came to give His life *'a ransom for many'* (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). By His death we are cleansed judicially before God and have *'no longer any conscience of sins'* (Heb. 10:2). This remains true even if there is failure after we believe. We know that our sins are no longer on us in the sight of God because Christ has washed us from them in His blood (Rev. 1:5). This washing, which took place when we first believed on Him, never needs to be repeated. But Christ also came to cleanse us morally so that we can enjoy fellowship with the Father and with Him, the Son. It is this aspect of cleansing that is brought before us in Numbers 19.

In the directions God gave about the different offerings a male animal was usually required. In this case, however, a heifer, a young female cow, had to be presented. This typifies Christ in His dependence on God, a quality that characterized His life when He was here on earth. In Luke's Gospel, we read of Him praying (an act of dependence) on at least eight occasions and frequently exhorting the disciples to pray. When He came to Gethsemane, He *'knelt down'* and *'prayed, saying, Father, if thou wilt remove this cup from me: – but then, not my will, but thine be done'* (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 11:1; 22:41–46). What perfection there was in Him! In every circumstance and service, He looked to God His Father and did not speak or act from Himself (John 14:10). In contrast with His perfection, a believer falls into sin because of a lack of dependence on God. One's own will is then chosen over God's will and temptation is entered.

'Without blemish, wherein is no defect, and upon which never came yoke' (v. 2)

The red heifer had to be without blemish and defect, and one that had never been yoked. Only as fulfilling these requirements could it point to Christ as the perfect, holy, sinless one. He was blameless in character and conduct and unspotted by the world through which He passed (1 Pet. 1:19). To His accusers He could say, *'Which of you convinces me of sin?'*, and when the time came *'by the eternal Spirit'* He *'offered himself spotless to God'* (John 8:46; Heb. 9:14).

He was also entirely free from the servitude of sin – that is, He was not subject to it (Luke 1:35; John 8:34–36). Not only did He not sin, but there was no sin in Him (1

Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5). He was *'the holy thing ... which shall be born'* and was and is *'Jesus Christ the righteous'* (Luke 1:35; 1 John 2:1).

Put to death outside the camp (v. 3)

The sacrifices that we read about in Leviticus were killed in the court of the tent of meeting, but the red heifer was to be slaughtered outside the camp. This outside place is where our failure brings us: *'And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp ... and whoever becomes defiled by a dead body. You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell'* (Num. 5:1–3). God cannot have fellowship with sin. Until our souls are restored, our nearness to Him ceases to be enjoyed. But then our eyes are turned to the one who *'suffered without the gate'* to *'sanctify the people by His own blood'* (Heb. 13:12). It is only because of His death for us that our fellowship with God can be restored.

Blood sprinkled seven times before the tent of meeting (v. 4)

Eleazar the priest was to *'take of its blood with his finger, and ... sprinkle of its blood directly before the tent of meeting seven times'*. This action reminds us that the sacrificial death of Christ is the unchanging basis of access to God (Heb. 10:19). It is that work alone that has made free access to God possible and never needs to be repeated (Heb. 9:26, 28; 10:10).¹

The red heifer wholly burned (v. 5)

The heifer was to be burned: *'its skin and its flesh, and its blood, with its dung'*. This points to the fact that our God is not only the God of all grace but also *'a consuming fire'* (1 Pet. 5:10; Heb. 12:29). When God intervenes to deliver His earthly people, the questions will be asked: *'Who among us shall dwell with the consuming fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting flames?'* (Isa. 33:14). There is really only

¹ It is notable that the red heifer was the sole animal sacrificed only once throughout the history of the children of Israel (eds.).

one who could ever do so, the one who *'once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God'* (1 Pet. 3:18).

Cedar-wood, hyssop and scarlet cast 'into the midst of the fire burning the heifer' (v. 6)

Cedar-wood, hyssop and scarlet were to be cast into the midst of the burning of the heifer, showing typically that our old man has been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6). The cedar-wood speaks of man in his high-minded pride and haughtiness (Isa. 2:12–13, 17), while the hyssop represents what is lowly and commonplace in fallen human beings (1 Ki. 4:33). In this context, the scarlet speaks of the glory of man as exalted in this present evil world (Rev. 17:3–4). All this – all that is of fallen, unregenerate man – was judged by God in the judgment that fell on Christ in those three hours of darkness on the cross.

Ashes gathered and laid up in a clean place (v. 9)

The ashes of the heifer were to be gathered up and put in a clean place outside the camp. This memorial of Christ's death under the unsparing judgment of God is laid up for us in the Word of God. In the type in Numbers 19 it was *'kept for the assembly of the children of Israel for a water of separation'* and was *'a purification for sin'* (v. 9). It was available for those who because of defilement were outside the place where fellowship is enjoyed. The antitype, the spiritual provision made for us when we are defiled by sin, is brought before us in John 13:1–17 and 1 John 2:1–2.

Eleazar the priest and others involved

Several Israelites were involved in order that this cleansing might be available. Eleazar the priest was not the high priest but a son of Aaron. His inclusion in the matter shows us that if we are to be used in bringing cleansing to another we need to be near to the Lord and to have priestly discernment – that is, discernment of the matter in a spiritual way based on God's Word. This discernment involves understanding how much God hates sin, for the red heifer was to be burned before Eleazar's eyes (Num. 19:5). Galatians 6:1 says: *'Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.'*

A clean man was to gather the ashes and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place. The involvement of anyone who is unclean in a process that has cleansing in view will clearly impair that desired outcome.

Bathing their flesh and washing their garments (vs. 7–10)

Eleazar and the one who burned the heifer had to bathe their flesh and wash their garments and were unclean until the evening. Both these men had been occupied with the actual burning of the animal. This shows that the more we understand how awful sins are in God's sight, and the severity of His judgment of them, the more sensitive our consciences will become. Any occupation with sins needs itself to be washed away. The bathing of the flesh reflects this. Our inner life, our thoughts and our meditations should concern things that are true, noble, just, pure, amiable and of good report (Phil. 4:8). Furthermore, our inward spiritual state will be manifested in our outward character and conduct. The washing of the garments shows that everything that others see in our lives should also be clean. How can Christ be seen in us if this is not the case (2 Cor. 3:2–3)?

Those for whom provision is made (vs. 14–16)

Provision was made for defilement caused by a person having died in a tent and for *'whoever in the open field touching one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a man, or a grave'*. In the former circumstance, *'all who come into the tent and all who are in the tent shall be unclean seven days. And every open vessel, which has no cover fastened on it, is unclean.'* The Hebrew word translated 'tent' is used both for *'the tent of meeting'* (i.e. the tabernacle) and for the tents in which the Israelites had their dwelling. Both these aspects need to be considered.

If an unbeliever, someone who is spiritually dead, is permitted to be active among saints of God, defilement will result. Their activity can only corrupt the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:17). There ought not to be any partnership at all with such. Fellowship with what is unclean must be broken off if fellowship with God is to be enjoyed (2 Cor. 6:14–18). Even a true believer is a source of defilement if sin is active in him. Holiness becomes God's house forever.

Accordingly, association with evil is not to be tolerated (Ps. 93:5). We are to show ourselves clear in all such cases (1 Cor. 5:7; 2 Cor. 7:11). Where attempts to rouse the collective conscience have been exhausted, the Word of God shows the path for the faithful Christian: *'But in a great house there are not only gold and silver*

vessels, but also wooden and earthen; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If therefore one shall have purified himself from these, in separating himself from them, he shall be a vessel to honor, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work' (2 Tim. 2:20–21). In such circumstances, this is the only course consistent with keeping *'the unity of the Spirit'* (Eph. 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:22).

It is a solemn consideration that one who is a source of defilement may even be found in a Christian home. A member of the family who is unbelieving, or a believer living a sinful life, defiles those who are in the tent and any who come into it. The only exception is where a vessel is covered. This speaks of the protection that communion with the Father and the Son affords. The heart being thoroughly occupied with God and with divine things, wrong thoughts have no point of entry into it. There ought nevertheless to be the deepest exercise where such circumstances exist.

Slain with a sword in the open fields (v. 16)

The first enemy the children of Israel met after crossing the Red Sea was Amalek (Ex. 17:8–16). He is a type of the flesh against which God *'will have war ... from generation to generation!'* Sadly, there was also conflict among themselves, often involving rebellion against the authority of Moses and the priesthood of Aaron. This conflict proceeded from their own flesh: *'Whence come wars and whence fightings among you? Is it not thence, from your pleasures, which war in your members?'* (Jas. 4:1).

We are both to *'put to death'* our *'members which are upon the earth, fornication, uncleanness, vile passions, evil lust, and unbridled desire, which is idolatry'* and to *'put off ... all these things, wrath, anger, malice, blasphemy, vile language out of [our mouths]'* (Col. 3:5, 8). If this is not done, is it any wonder that there is defilement and that communion with God is broken? The other enemies the children of Israel met on the way to Canaan represent different aspects of the flesh and the means the enemy uses to act upon it.

The bone of a man (v. 16)

We might have thought that *'the bone of a man'* was nothing to be particularly concerned about, but any practice on which death has a claim because of sin is not to be touched. Corrupt and corrupting principles and practices are commonplace in the world and a Christian must be careful not to adopt them.

A grave (v. 16)

The reference to a grave reminds us of the scathing words of the Lord Jesus to the scribes and Pharisees: *‘Woe to you ... hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness’* (Matt. 23:27–28). Hypocrisy is a dreadful thing. When the Pharisees asked the Lord Jesus who He was He could answer, *‘Altogether that which I also say to you’* (John 8:25). There should be no difference at all between what we present ourselves as being and what we really are.

The means of cleansing (v. 17)

There was no blood in what was used to cleanse from defilement. Some of the ashes of the heifer were to be placed in a vessel and running water poured over them. This was then sprinkled on the person and things that were unclean. We have already seen that the ashes laid up in a clean place represent the memorial of God’s unsparing judgment of sins at the cross. The running water speaks of the activity of the Holy Spirit who through the Word of God brings the defilement home to the conscience of the defiled person (John 7:37–39; Ps. 119:9). The use of hyssop shows that those immediately involved are to be marked by *‘a spirit of meekness, considering themselves lest they also be tempted’* (Gal. 6:1). The same lowliness of mind that marked the Lord Jesus when He washed the feet of the disciples is to mark those who follow His example (John 13:2-5, 12-17).

Those for whom cleansing was available remained unclean for a certain period. The passing of three days before the application of the water of separation shows that the loss of fellowship with God may not at first be felt. There has been carelessness in one’s walk and the conscience must be reached. Once it is, and the failure is deeply felt and confessed to God, He can forgive and *‘cleanse us from all unrighteousness’* (1 John 1:9). But the water of separation had also to be sprinkled on the person on the seventh day. Typically, this removed any remaining sense of failure so that fellowship with God and its privileges could be fully enjoyed again.

Solemnly, anyone who did not purify himself on the third day remained unclean on the seventh day. The onus was clearly on the defiled person to make use of the cleansing available. At the end of the chapter, we read that one who did not purify himself was *‘cut off from the midst of the congregation, for he has defiled the*

sanctuary of Jehovah: the water of separation has not been sprinkled on him: he is unclean' (v. 20). It reminds us of the words of the Lord Jesus: 'If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me'; and 'you are clean, but not all of you'. 'For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, You are not all clean' (John 13:8, 10–11).

Source: Truth & Testimony, Issue 2, 2024

