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## Purification in Childbirth

### Leviticus 12:1-8

**Intro:** From ch11-ch15, the instructions and regulations given in Leviticus deal with ritual impurity. While ch11 is concerned with ritual impurity as it relates to unclean animals and animal carcasses, the next 4 chapters deal with ritual impurity that results from matters related to the human body. Today's text addresses the impurity experienced by the mother who has just given birth. The text makes it clear that her impurity is not because of the child's arrival (which was a joyous event in Israel) but because of the blood loss during and after the birth process. This passage can be divided into 3 sections: 1) the purification procedures unique to a boy's birth (1-4); the procedures unique to a girl's birth (5); the final purification procedures, which are the same for boys and girls (6-8). It's a very short chapter with just 8 verses but it produces many difficult questions!

**1-4** – These verses address what a new mother must do to become ritually pure after giving birth to a son. When a son was born, the mother's initial impurity lasted 7 days. In ancient Israel, as in many cultures, a person had to wait a certain period of time in order to transition from one state to another (impurity to purity). For Israelites, "minor" impurities generally lasted until evening, as we saw in ch11. Major impurities, like here, required 7 days or longer. Since the # 7 was associated with completeness and thoroughness, 7 days represented a sufficient waiting period.

Due to the loss of blood that occurred during childbirth, the mother's ritual impurity was similar to that of her monthly menstrual period, which will be dealt with in ch15. What this meant was that the impurity of childbirth lasted 7 days, was communicable to whoever touched her or came into contact with anything on which she had sat and made sexual relations with her off-limits. Of course, these restrictions didn't mean that family and friends weren't allowed to come and extend physical comfort to her. As we learned in ch11, it's usually not morally wrong to become impure as long as one dealt with it properly.

V3 briefly turns to an issue of the 8<sup>th</sup> day: the son's circumcision. This practice was rooted in Gen 17:11-12, where the Lord commands Abraham

to circumcise his sons as the sign of the covenant between them. This sign was to serve as visible symbol of the covenant, a perpetual reminder in their flesh that the Lord was their God. There were undoubtedly some hygienic benefits to circumcision but, more important to the Israelites were the theological and prophetic implications of it. Circumcision is a cutting away of the flesh and as such, it was an appropriate sign of the covenant for those who put no trust in the flesh. Also, because circumcision deals with the organ of procreation, it was a constant reminder of the seed of Abraham, which would ultimately bring the Messiah. When the Israelites applied this covenant sign to their sons, they're expressing their faith in their covenant Lord and proclaiming that this child was now a covenant member, responsible for responding to his covenant privileges with faith and obedience.

On this same day, the new mother's 2nd process of purification began. During this time she was prohibited from touching anything sacred (like fellowship offering meat) or going to the sanctuary (the Lord's dwelling place). These prohibitions would have also applied to the 1<sup>st</sup> process of purification of v2 but the fact that they are specified here may suggest these are the only restrictions placed on the mother during this time; thus, this impurity is less severe (she didn't make other impure through physical contact). Still, those who were ritually impure could profane that which was holy (Nadab and Abihu) so these prohibitions were to be followed diligently. This text impressed upon every Israelite the importance of respecting the Lord by respecting those things associated with His holiness.

This 2<sup>nd</sup> purification process lasted 33 days; bringing the total time to 40 days. Like the # 7, the # 40 can also denote thoroughness or completeness in the Bible, as when the Lord sent the Flood waters on the earth for 40 days and 40 nights ([Gen 7:4](#)) or when the Israelites spied out Canaan for 40 days ([Num 13:25](#)). As a result, by the end of this time, the new mother would have undergone a thorough wait and would now be ready to transition fully from being ritually impure to being ritually pure.

**5** – This is the purification process that is to take place following the delivery of a daughter. Right away, we notice some major differences. First, there's no mention that the girl is to be circumcised. This should come as no surprise because plenty of previous passages stipulate that circumcision was only for male Israelites ([Gen 17:10, 12, 14](#); [Ex 12:48](#)). You may think

it's only logical but actually, it's a great mercy from the Lord because female circumcision is still practiced in many places today; causing a great many detrimental physical side effects for those forced into it.

But restricting circumcision to males does lead to a natural question: If circumcision is the covenant sign and only males received it, does this mean that only males were considered covenant members in Israel? By no means! In Israel, the father was considered the representative head of the family. If he received the sign of the covenant, then all who were members of the family – including all females – were considered to be covenant members as well.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> difference of a daughter's birth was the length of the mother's impurity: it was doubled to 14 days and 66 days, for a total of 80 days. As we can see, the text offers no explanation for this difference so as a result, many are compelled to offer their own rationales. Some state that the passage is sexist, saying that the discrepancy points to a lesser respect for the female gender. Does this suggest that females are more unclean or inferior to males? This rationale is hard to square with the Israelites' own understanding of creation, where both male and female were created in God's image. As such, it violates the balance of biblical revelation so it should be rejected. Some propose medical reasons while others say it could merely be a cultural tradition.

I think most if not all of these rationales are wrong because they begin from the premise that what the text describes is a negative thing. This purification process was not to be understood as a penalty. On the contrary, in a time when the only type of painkillers that existed were alcohol based (wine), one important benefit of this purification process was to give the new Israelite mother the ancient equivalent of a modern maternity leave. This ritual impurity she was under actually relieved her of many social obligations and new mothers welcomed these days of seclusion when they could rest, recuperate and spend many days bonding with their newborn. Taken from that perspective, it's almost as if new mothers of sons were short-changed on their maternity leave. But, since the boys were to be circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, her initial impurity could only last 7 days, or else she wouldn't be able to be there for the ceremony. We're not sure to what extent she was able to participate but at least we know she was able to attend in some fashion.

**6-8** – As you might expect for a “major” impurity, the mother now brings sacrifices to complete the purification process. 2 sacrifices are mentioned the burnt offering (**1:1-17**) and the sin (or purification) offering (**4:1-35**). The burnt offering consisted of a year-old lamb while the sin (purification) offering consisted of a young pigeon or dove. The sin offering served to remove the mother’s ritual impurity from the tent of meeting (tabernacle) and its contents as well as from the mother herself. The burnt offering served a dual role, atoning for the mother’s general sinfulness as she came before the Lord and expressing her deep gratitude and praise for the gift of her child.

The mother was to bring these offerings to the entrance of the tabernacle of meeting, meaning the area in the courtyard in front of the tent’s entryway. This shows that women were as welcome as men to come and worship before the Lord (Hannah: **I Sam 1**). The priest would then offer her sacrifices to the Lord in order to make atonement for her. As we saw in 1:4, atonement in Leviticus involves both purification and ransom. This text clearly focuses on the purification aspect of atonement but not just any type of purification would do. She must take care to bring the offerings prescribed in these instructions. But, if she couldn’t afford a lamb, she could bring 2 doves or 2 young pigeons. This was a merciful concession, which not only demonstrates the Lord’s love for the poor but anticipates the extent to which He will one day share in their experience (**Lk 2:22-24**).

Well, we’ve dealt with the text, but as I said, we’re left with more questions than we’ve answered. After going through **ch 1-7**, it’s not hard to understand the process of purification but the real question is: Why was it even necessary? Why would a woman become ritually impure by giving birth? Since the new mother was to bring a sin offering, does it imply that the process of conception involves sin? Was childbirth viewed so negatively in that day?

Before we answer these questions, we must remember 2 facts: 1<sup>st</sup>, in every part of Scripture, childbirth is celebrated! God was the one who commanded reproduction. In **Gen 1:28**, He told Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth...” Some have said this is the only command of God that humanity has consistently obeyed. We’ve been fruitful and we have multiplied. So childbirth is the result of obeying God’s creation command.

Also, [Ps 127:3](#) says that children are a heritage from the Lord... and Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them...(5). Childbirth is a cause for celebration. In the OT, being without children was seen as a great affliction; it was a form of suffering. In [Gen 30](#) we're told that Jacob's wife Rachel was barren. In v1 she actually declared to Jacob, "Give me children or else I die!" Ironically, she would die giving birth to her 2<sup>nd</sup> son. But, when God gave a child to a family, they received that gift as a great blessing.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> fact we should remember is that in Leviticus, the word unclean doesn't always refer to sin. It's certainly not sin here. Uncleanness after childbirth is not the result of sin. Uncleanness was sometimes a moral category but it was also a ritual category. People became unclean because of sin and because of their association with anything that resembled or represented the realm of death. In the case of childbirth, childbirth involves blood, blood loss was associated with death (because the life was in the blood) so childbirth rendered the mother unclean because of the blood. The only blood God allowed into the tabernacle was sacrificial blood, the blood of animals shed for the purpose of atonement. Everything else that had to do with death was to be kept separate from the tabernacle.

So, childbirth rendered a mother ritually unclean but not morally unclean. God commands celebration of childbirth. Viewing pregnancy or the birth of a baby as an inconvenience or an unwanted expense is always against the will of God. Of course, most babies who are viewed this way were most likely conceived contrary to the will and purpose of God for sex. The evil practice of abortion is the result of thinking the exact opposite as God does about the birth of a baby. Instead of celebrating God's gift of new life, those who abort kill God's gift of new life. When they do, they dishonor God's gift and put themselves in the place of God, wrongfully usurping His authority to give and take life. God's Word leads us to celebrate pregnancy and childbirth as gifts from Him. [Ps 100:3](#) plainly says God made us; babies are His work and His gift and they should always be celebrated as such.

So, we understand that blood loss was the cause of the ritual impurity but the question still stands: why would losing blood cause ritual impurity? We touched on this briefly in the last section but it bears a closer look. Many scholars attribute the ritual impurity as being related to the "death" element of childbirth. The bleeding that necessarily occurs in childbirth brings the mother into contact with the realm of death. The act of childbirth is an act in

which the realms of life and death intersect. It is this contact with death that renders the mother impure and prompts the need for the purification rites.

The possibility of maternal death in the act of childbirth, which is greatly reduced in our more medically advanced societies, was much greater in ancient times. There are 2 recorded instances of a mother's death during childbirth in the OT. Rachel dies while giving birth to Benjamin ([Gen 35:16-20](#)) and the unnamed wife of Phinehas dies giving birth to a son she named Ichabod ([1 Sam 4:19-22](#)). These examples highlight the undeniable link between death and life in childbirth. Now, while maternal death has been almost (but not completely) eliminated, there are still many instances of miscarried or stillborn babies. Even with all of our advancements, death still moves in maternity wards.

But again, why is death defiling? Death is defiling because ultimately, it's caused by sin! We've recognize the link between death and life in childbirth but according to the creation account in [Gen 1-3](#), this link was never supposed to exist. The act of giving birth, commanded in [Gen 1:28](#), takes on a threatening element because of the Fall in God's pronouncement to Eve in [Gen 3:16](#). The word multiply in [1:28](#) and multiply in [3:16](#) derive from the same Hebrew root (rabah). That which was meant to only be a blessing had now become fraught with great pain and danger. It becomes a place where life and death meet.

Childbirth put women and babies in danger of death. Therefore, ironically, childbirth was associated with death. Anything that was associated with death was not allowed to approach the worship of the Lord because from the very beginning God communicated the truth that death is caused by sin. The first sin led to death and sin's been leading to death ever since. [Rom 6:23](#) says, "The wages of sin is death..." Because of death's association with sin, generally anything having to do with death was unclean and God required its separation from worship.

As we've seen before in Leviticus, there are a number of cases that the sin offering is commanded to be offered when there's no suggestion that the particular individual has actually sinned. That's why many scholars think a better name for the sin offering is the purification offering. At the same time, the story of the Bible teaches us that the entire reason why impurities exist at all is on account of sin. Thus, even where an individual presents a sin

offering and there is no real question of some personal sin on their part, nevertheless, to borrow a phrase from Gen 4:7, “sin lies (is crouching) at the door...” Sin is always in the background. So, regardless if an Israelite was seeking to rectify something as mundane as a moldy house or a bodily discharge, they’re reminded of a world that’s threatened by sin.

Luke, in his Gospel, recorded the experience of one particular young woman who went through the experience of childbirth. She faithfully observed the ceremony of purification and she and her husband were so poor that they couldn’t afford a lamb for the burnt offering. Her name was Mary and her husband was Joseph and their son’s name was Jesus (Lk 2:22-24). The law that Luke sites here is God’s law found in our text in ch 12. It wasn’t enough that Jesus emptied Himself of His rightful divine glory and condescended to walk among men as a man but it is amazing that He chose to do so as a poor man from a poor family. And yet, Paul reminds us in II Cor 8:9 that this was all for our own eventual benefit!

Finally, it’s important to note that the Book of Hebrews teaches us how the OT sacrifices, though they certainly served their purpose in their context, could not ultimately provide the necessary purification from sin. Heb 10:4 says, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.” This applies just as much to the doves or young pigeons Mary and Joseph offered for her purification. Instead, it was that little boy, whom they circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day and consecrated to the Lord on that trip to the temple, who by His death would ultimately provide the perfect purification/sin offering for their complete redemption, and ours.

It would be that little boy, not the priests Mary and Joseph presented their offering to, who would become the true High Priest, One who would sit down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. It was this High Priest who would secure our salvation, our redemption and our purification from sin; not by the sacrifice of bulls, lambs, goats, pigeons or doves but by the sacrifice of His own body and His own blood.

This purification is still a process but it’s not a process that involves time but rather a process that involves realizing and accepting undeniable truth: accepting that by nature, you are a sinner – a child of wrath; accepting that because you’re a sinner, you now need a savior; acknowledging that Jesus Christ is the only Savior you need and then, the most important step –

accepting Him as your Lord and Savior! If you have never gone through that process, then you are not a Christian, you're not a true child of God. That truth in itself may be hard to accept but your lifestyle and circumstances might lead you to see the truth of it. If your life is a wreck and you don't know why, come to Jesus. Let Him put your feet upon the rock of His truth and let Him wash away not only the guilt of sin but the stain as well. □