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Addressing Personal Impurity Leviticus 13:1-59

Intro: This section of Leviticus, from ch11-15, deals with the reality of personal impurity, its various causes, how to recognize it and most importantly, how to address it. Of course, all of these instructions are given in light of the events surrounding the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. They had approach the Lord's presence in a manner that was not prescribed (allowed) by the Lord and it cost them their lives in a very dramatic and public way. This public display of the Lord's just judgment effectively clarified in the minds of all Israel the importance of always following the Lord's instructions and being careful to only approach Him in a ritually clean manner.

Again, ch11 dealt with ritual impurity resulting from contact with unclean animals and the carcasses of dead animals. The remaining chapters (12-15) focus on ritual impurity arising from matters related to the human body. These 4 chapters are presented and in a chiastic order: ch12 deals with impurity resulting from the loss of bodily fluids (blood loss in childbirth); ch13-14 deals with impurity that results from ritually defiling skin diseases; ch15 deals with impurity that results from the loss of bodily fluids. The order is purposeful and deliberate.

In many cases, the text refer to conditions that are scientifically unclear and the laws or instructions for them are certainly now obsolete in the current age of the new covenant. Case in point, the specific focus of ch13-14 is with the identification of and ritual prescriptions for dealing with surface diseases, blemishes and discolorations on skin, fabric and the walls of houses. That being said, we are still to approach these verses with II Tim 3:16 as our guide. We should also recognize that in every chapter of Leviticus, including these, we also see the truth of Jesus' words in Mt 5:17, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets, I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." Jesus fulfills the Law. He also saves us from sin, heals us, cleanses us and gives us eternal life. God gave laws like the ones in this section to teach us how He related to His people Israel and how He wants to relate to us, His people, today.

We should note first that the purpose of these laws isn't medical but ritual.

God isn't prescribing medical procedures to cure skin diseases. Instead, God decreed that certain kinds of sicknesses rendered His people ritually unclean. People who were unclean weren't allowed to enter into worship at the tabernacle or to be in fellowship with God's people. Obviously, Israelites would have seen exclusion from worship and fellowship as a hardship, so being sick or unclean wasn't desirable to anyone. The goal of this section is to teach the Israelites how to diagnose conditions that made them ritually unclean and, more importantly, how to return to a state of cleanness so they could then return to worship and fellowship.

Aside from the fact that ch13-14 are connected by the same basic theme-surface blemishes in the skin, fabric or walls-there are 2 Hebrew words that tie these verses together more specifically. The first one is tsara'at, which occurs 30 times in these 2 chapters and which, in older translations, was rendered as leprosy, but more recent translations use something along the lines of "defiling skin disease." This same word also occurs in the passages dealing with fabric and house mold and is actually translated as mold in those sections. So, tsara'at ties these chapters together in a literary sense as they all deal with variations of the same basic affliction.

Now, since the word can be translated as skin disease and mold, it doesn't necessarily mean leprosy. Most scholars today believe the term actually describes a variety of skin diseases; some opting to use the term scale disease to refer to all skin related infections while others think psoriasis comes closest to the biblical description. Some believe that at least one of the diseases referred to could be what is currently considered leprosy (Hansen's disease) while other believe leprosy isn't referred to at all here. Which is it? I have know clue but what I do know is that we don't need to come to any firm conclusions on this matter to understand what the Bible is teaching us here.

The 2nd Hebrew word that ties these passages together is nega'. This word occurs 78 times in the OT with 61 of those occurrences being in ch13-14. In this passage it's variously translated as defiling skin disease, as well as sore, affected person, affected area, mold and spoiled. In other OT passages it's translated as disease, plague, assault, disaster, affliction, wound and scourge. Most instructive to our text here is the most recent prior use of the term, which was in Ex 11:1, where nega' refers to the last plague God will

bring on the Egyptians: death of their firstborn.

The use of these 2 words (tsara'at and nega') casts an ominous shadow over the content of these chapters. In most ancient Near East cultures, disease was always considered the work of malevolent supernatural forces. Scale disease, in particular, stood out as a primary means of divine punishment. Of course, the OT contributes to and even seems to confirm this understanding. There are several characters that contracted a skin disease and each one is attributed to divine punishment from God: Miriam ([Num 12:9-15](#)); Gehazi, Elisha's dishonest servant ([II Kings 5:27](#)) and King Uzziah ([II Chr 26:19-21](#)). See also David's curse on Joab and his family after Abner's murder ([II Sam 3:29](#)).

Furthermore, in the Bible, God is always the author of nega', it is always a divine punishment. When nega' occurs in scripture, it is always God who caused it to occur. In fact, [14:34](#) is a clear example of this. God puts the spreading mold (leprous plague) in the house. The Lord is the one who's put it there and He provides the instructions as to how to address it. It may be that [14:34](#) is the default setting for understanding all the occurrences of tsara'at and nega' in these 2 chapters. If there is an infection in someone's skin or mold in a piece of fabric or the wall of a house, it was the Lord that put it there.

This understanding, which was prevalent in the Near East and well evidenced in the OT, that defiling skin diseases were among the punishments that God could bring on people – in conjunction with the fact that nega' has strong “punishment from God” connotations in the OT, actually presents us with a dilemma in understanding these chapters. On the one hand, if [ch13-14](#) are to be understood as God bringing these afflictions on the Israelites on account of their sins, that would entirely be consistent with the rest of the OT where all disease was generally regarded as a punishment from God for some wrongdoing. In fact, there was a tradition that said tsara'at specifically represented a punishment from God for acts of malice.

On the other hand, there's no explicit statement in the passage that alludes to or even implies that the person with a skin disease or one whose clothing or home has been infected with mold has sinned against God. It's also possible that [14:34](#) may simply mean that all occurrences of skin disease or

mold are under the sovereign control of God. Besides, the general perspective of the text, with the diligence of the priest's examinations and the descriptions of the purification procedures seem to point to the expectation that, for the greater majority of the maladies in the text, the people will be healed of their skin problems, they will not have to throw away their clothes and they will not have to tear down their houses. If there is a malady, it may or may not be caused by sin. If it is, there's always repentance and reconciliation. Disease and destruction need not be the final state.

Still, even if the condition wasn't that serious, the affected individual couldn't presume this to be the case. When afflicted by a skin disease, the person couldn't just assume, "It's probably nothing" and decide not to go to the priest for him to carry out the prescribed examination. The reluctance to report a skin eruption and face possible quarantine and possible banishment is quite understandable. But, these were still matters of life and death. When Israelites presented themselves before the Lord at the tabernacle, they had to be in a state of ritual purity. This wasn't just the concern of the affected person. If there were ritual contagion in the community, it could be fatal for many others who presented themselves to the Lord if they had unwittingly come in contact with a skin diseased person. That's why the skin diseased person must be quarantined outside the camp: the fatal contact between the impure and the sacred had to be avoided at all costs.

Ultimately, the instructions and prescriptions in these chapters were intended to foster in the Israelites an attitude that was hopeful and trusting in the gracious love and kindness of their covenant King but also recognized His utter holiness and thus, never to presume upon His grace through laxity or disrespect.

Some of the procedures in ch **13-14** were designed to determine whether the disease resulted in a minor impurity or a major one. Our text describes 7 distinct situations in regards to skin diseases. The first is **1-8**. This is a case of a swelling, scab or bright spot on the skin. The affected one showed the condition to the priest. If it met the criteria for impurity, the priest declared it unclean. If the condition was uncertain, they'd be quarantined for 7 days, examined again and then quarantined for 7 days more. After 14 days, if the spot had spread, the priest declared them unclean. If it hadn't spread, they'd

wash their clothes (minor impurity) and the priest would declare them clean.

The 2nd situation is in **9-17**. The infected person was to be examined by the priest. If the skin displayed the symptoms of impurity, they were declared unclean. But, if white skin grew, they were declared clean, since white skin was an indication of new, uninfected skin. The 3rd condition is in **18-23** dealing with boils. The boils must be shown to the priest, who would either declare it unclean or quarantine the person for 7 days. At the end of the 7 days, if the boil had improved, they were declared clean, if not, the priest would declare them unclean. The 4th situation is in **24-28**. Burns were handled the same way as boils.

The 5th situation, in **29-37**, deals with infections on the head or chin. Again, the condition would be declared unclean if it met the criteria but if it was uncertain, they'd be quarantined for 7–14 days and then a determination was made. The 6th situation, in **38-39**, deals with bright spots on the skin. In this case, the affected party would appear before the priest and he'd simply declare them clean or unclean. The last condition, **40-44**, concerns baldness. Thankfully, baldness didn't make anyone unclean. But if a reddish, white infection appeared, the priest was to examine it. If the affected area was swollen, the priest would pronounce the affected person unclean. In each case, the priest's role is that of a monitor. He diagnoses, but he doesn't prescribe a cure. He's not a doctor. At the same time, while the priest pronounces certain individual to be ceremonially or ritually unclean, he doesn't pronounce them to be sinners.

The concept of disease as a direct punishment from God upon sin permeated Near Eastern society. In the book of Job, Bildad, one of Job's "friends," described skin disease as an irrefutable sign that the afflicted one was a sinner. This declaration is ironic as it's the very concept that the Book of Job is challenging. It doesn't attempt to overturn the concept that God punishes people for their sins; He does. What it does challenge is that this concept is to be taken for granted in every situation. It may be that there are other reasons why the person is afflicted. Job wasn't afflicted because he was a sinner; God put him on display as a showcase saint! That's why it's important to note that there is no explicit suggestion in ch13-14 that any affected person is being punished by God. That may certainly be the case, but it is not explicit in the text so it should never automatically be assumed.

45-46 – The ritually defiling skin diseases resulted in a major ritual impurity. These couldn't be handled with a simple washing of the body and clothes. Since major impurities spread easily by physical contact, this passage focuses on minimizing contact between those who are ritually impure and those who aren't. Of course, this would have the added benefit of minimizing the spread of any tsara'at diseases that might have been contagious but this would be secondary to ritual impurity. Those affected with ritually impure skin diseases were required to follow 3 rules.

First, they had to change their physical appearance; most likely to warn others of their condition from a distance. They were to wear torn clothes, let their hair go unkempt and cover the lower part of their face. Not by accident, these actions were also signs of mourning and, as such, they were especially appropriate for those who experienced the pain of living outside the covenant community of Israel. 2nd, they were to constantly cry out, "Unclean, unclean!" clearly to alert others of their unfortunate condition. 3Rd, they had to live outside the camp. This didn't mean they had to live in solitude (alone) but that they were to live apart from the larger group of Israel.

At the very least, they could live with others suffering the same affliction. At the very most, it's possible that family or friends could join them from time to time, since it wasn't wrong to become impure in this instance, it would only be wrong if they failed to deal with the impurity properly. To purify themselves, family or friends would have to participate in the appropriate purification procedures before they could re-enter the camp. As comforting and encouraging as these occasional visits may have been, living apart from the covenant community was still a hardship, since the community was the covenant family. And, while those with the disease could certainly still praise and worship the Lord outside the camp, their deepest longing would have been to do so with their covenant brothers and sisters at the tent of meeting (Ps 42:1-4; or 122:1 "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord'").

To live outside the camp meant to be cut off from the blessings of the covenant. In light of this, it's no wonder that when a person was diagnosed as unclean they had to go into mourning. They were experiencing a living death because their life as a member of God's covenant people came to an end. Just as Adam and Eve experienced a living death when they were

driven from Eden, so every person who was diagnosed as unclean suffered a similar fate. This painful reality sheds greater light on the abject misery and spiritual abandonment that would be felt by Israel's future exiles. They weren't just outside the camp, they were carried outside the Promise Land altogether!

Those affected with the major ritual impurity brought on by these diseases were to follow these 3 rules as long as the condition persisted. While this may seem harsh, these rules were not meant to increase their hardship but to prevent the impurity from spreading among the general population of Israel. Although not for ritual purity reasons, modern societies do a similar thing when they quarantine those suffering from certain contagious diseases. While the intention is the same (prohibiting the spread) modern society is focused on physical considerations, not spiritual.

47-59 – This final section has to do with garments that were suspected of being infected. Again, the owner of the clothes took them to the priest and the inspection process was even more extensive than that for inspecting skin. It may seem odd that God would even subject garments to various corruptions but God is interested in every aspect of our lives and we need to come to grips with the fact that every aspect of our lives are affected by sin in one way or another. The rottenness and decay that manifests itself all around us in different and varied ways is there to remind us of both the reality and result of sin. While we shouldn't associate every problem that appears in our lives as a punishment for personal sin, we should still remember that in the midst of this life, we are surrounded by the reality and the threat of death. Sin and death make up the background of the world in which we live.

What application are we to make from this? Those suffering from tsara'at were bearers of severe ritual impurity. The text doesn't say why this was true, it just assumes it as a fact and explains how to identify it and how to quarantine it. These major impurities had to be quarantined because they could easily spread throughout the camp, eventually defiling the Lord's holy palace. This would have been a sign of great disrespect, akin to vandalizing a modern king's palace. So, those with impurities had to leave the camp until they were healed. These drastic measures testified of to undeniable realities: the severity of the impurity and the holiness of the Lord, into whose presence ritual impurity was never to come.

Naturally, if this were true of ritual impurity, Israelites could easily conclude that the same was true of moral impurity. So these drastic measures would have served Israel as visual reminders of the importance of holy living. Purity was to always characterize the lives of God's holy people, a desire echoed by the Psalmist in [Ps 51:10](#), "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." While the NT leaves behind the cultural concept of ritual purity and impurity, it vigorously maintains that Christians are still to seek moral purity-and avoid moral impurity- in every aspect of their lives. As it was for the Israelites, this is to be our logical response of worshipful obedience to the Lord's redeeming activity in our lives. We are to be holy because He is holy. This is our way of acknowledging His own holiness and reflecting that holiness to a watching world.

As for those who were quarantined, it's certainly possible that their affliction was a sign of the Lord's discipline for a specific sin, and the sufferer may very well examined their lives to see if this was the case ([Ps 139:23-24](#)). This should be a practice of believers today as well ([I Cor 11:29-30](#)). Of course, this should only be a personal exercise. Nowhere does the Bible ever encourage, or even allow us to assume that sickness is always the result of a specific sin. Trials and tribulations in our lives should lead us to analyze the state of our fellowship with the Lord and if it is severe enough, it may even compel us to confirm our relationship with the Lord. But, as Job clearly demonstrates that suffering and sin don't always go together, it warns us against judging others who are suffering. Our duty, as brothers and sisters to the suffering believer, is to pray for, help and encourage them in every possible way.

We are to pursue holiness so that we might reflect the reality of our Savior's holiness to the world. 😊