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## Process of Purification Leviticus 14:1-57

**Intro:** As we make our way through the Book of Leviticus and discover how repetitious, detailed and boring the laws and regulation it records may be, it's then surprising to learn that they are all designed to mitigate the real danger of God's presence in the midst of His people Israel. The overarching theme of the Book is not just the holiness of God but as [10:3](#) reveals, the holiness of God must be recognized by His people and this holy God must be glorified by priestly obedience. If the common Israelite assumed this was exclusively the responsibility of the priesthood, this requirement will be extended to all of Israel later in [22:32](#). Sanctifying God becomes the responsibility of Israel as a whole and this is what will be taught in the last section of the book ([17-27](#)).

In our current section ([11-15](#)), instructions are given to teach Israel how to remain separate from everything that is unclean, a necessary requirement for all who desire to present themselves before a holy God ([15:31a](#)). All of this is necessary preparation for Israel's eventual entrance into the Promise Land, also known as the Holy Land. If God's people were to neglect God's instructions, they would be expelled from the Holy Land. A holy land demands a holy people – Thus, God instructs Israel (and all His people) to, “Be holy, for I am holy,” which is the motto of the Book.

In our last study, we saw the devastating personal consequences faced by those who contracted a tsara'at – a word used both to identify a defiling skin disease as well as mold or mildew that could appear in fabric or on anything made of leather. The consequence of a defiling skin disease was banishment from the covenant community. The affected party could not participate in worship or even in normal Israelite society; they were expelled from communal life to live outside the camp, outside the blessings of the covenant. The consequence of finding mold in the fabric of clothing was that the defiled garment was to be burned in the fire; it wasn't to be purified, it was to be destroyed.

After the discouraging information in [ch13](#), with its emphasis on uncleanness and isolation, [ch14](#) provides the happy ray of hope that we

need: a leper can be cleansed and restored! The bad news of judgment must be received and endured so that we might properly appreciate the good news of salvation.

**1-20** – This section deals with the purification, atonement and restoration process for those who had been declared unclean as the result of a defiling skin disease (tsara'at). Those individuals thus affected would undoubtedly have prayed to the Lord for healing. The Jews had no cure for any tsara'at so, if the victim became well, it was a gift of God's mercy and grace. The occurrence of this type of disease and its healing would be in direct relation to the overall obedience and faithfulness of the individual and Israelite society as a whole. This speaks to the utter spiritual degradation that existed much later on in the society of the Northern kingdom of Israel during Elisha's ministry. Jesus points this out in His comments in **Luke 4:27**, "And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

As we can see, even though the individual has been healed of their tsara'at, they still needed to remove the ritual impurity caused by the defiling skin disease. The process from impurity to purity was gradual and involved 3 different ceremonies that corresponded to 3 different levels of purity. After the 1<sup>st</sup> ceremony, those being cleansed were pure enough to re-enter the camp (**2-8**); after the 2<sup>nd</sup>, they were pure enough to go to the tabernacle (**9**); after the 3<sup>rd</sup>, they were pure enough to fully re-enter normal Israelite society (**10-20**). There are also 2 movements made by the person being purified: 1) from outside the camp to inside the camp; 2) from inside the camp to the tabernacle. At each location, the individual is declared to be ritually pure. We should note that this only meant they were pure enough for this stage. It's only at the end of the entire process that the restored person is finally a happy camper once again.

The one who'd been physically healed was now ready to begin the process of ritual purification. There are several notable aspects to this process. 1<sup>st</sup>. Since the affected person couldn't enter the camp, the priest would need to go outside the camp to examine and confirm that a healing had actually occurred. If it had, the priest would give an order for the ritual materials to be collected and brought to him: 2 live (wild) and ritually clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop. The word translated live also means wild. It's obvious the birds must be living so the context points to wild as the

correct meaning. The text doesn't explain why they must be wild but this would've lessened the chance of the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird, who was laden with ritual impurity, would return to the camp, bringing the impurity back in to it.

This ceremony was unusual in that it didn't take place at the tabernacle but outside the camp, in the community of those who were unclean from a major impurity. Cedar is a wood that is resistant to disease and rot and it naturally has a red tint to it. Most commentators believe the scarlet here is yarn, not cloth. It's color may also have symbolized blood. Hyssop branches were often used in rituals for the sprinkling of blood or water. When David cried out, "purge me with hyssop" in [Ps 51:7](#), he was admitting that he was as bad as a leper, but he was a cleansed leper.

In the purification ritual, one of the bird was to be killed over a clay pot that was filled with "running water." While that may sound strange, it's merely a euphemism for water that comes from a flowing source such as a spring, a creek or a river. It didn't come from a well or a cistern. It was thought to be pure, fresh water. The pot would catch the blood from the bird so that water and blood – 2 of the main cleansing agents in Israel- could be used together in the rite.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> bird, which was still alive, together with the cedar wood, the scarlet yarn and the hyssop branch were dipped in the blood and water mixture held in the clay pot. How did the priest control all this in a useful fashion? The cedar wood (a stick) was used as a handle and the hyssop and living bird were attached to it with the scarlet yarn. The bird was bound to this cedar handle in such a way that its tail feathers were pointing downward so that they could be dipped in the blood of the first bird. The whole of this made an instrument for the sprinkling of this blood.

The priest, having dipped these items into the blood, would then sprinkle the one being purified 7 times, which was an act often associated with cleansing. The priest would then pronounce the individual clean – meaning clean enough for this level of purification; and then the priest would release the 2<sup>nd</sup> bird into the open field or back into the wild. This act parallels the release of the live goat (the scapegoat) in [16:21-22](#), suggesting that just as the live goat carried away the people's sin, so the live bird carried away the person's impurity.

The person being purified was then to perform 3 final cleansing rites:

washing their clothes, bathing and shaving; each of which signifies cleansing and often occur in purification rites, although shaving has a stronger significance since it goes beyond the mere removal of dirt to the removal of anything left on the skin. Those who completed these rites reached an initial level of ritual purity and were allowed back into the camp, but they had to stay outside their tent for 7 days. This was a typical waiting period for major impurities and suggested the person's remaining impurity was strong enough to contaminate anything inside the tent. It also had the added benefit of displaying the purification process with in public view, for all of Israel to witness and confirm.

The next rite (9) provided the individual with further purification. This rite occurs after the 7 day waiting period and is the same described in 8a: washing clothes, bathing and shaving. This shaving includes the beard and eyebrows – all the hair off his head; their newly healed skin was to be smooth and clean. This shaving is significant because it meant the recovered leper would start all over again as if they were a newborn baby – as if they were born again.

The final rites took place on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and they returned the person to a regular state of ritual purity and allowed them to reintegrate fully into the covenant community. These rites took place at the tabernacle and as such, they required the 3 main atoning sacrifices: the restitution offering (12-18), the purification offering (19a) and the burnt offering (19b-20). The performance of all 3 assured the individual that all their impurity had been fully addressed.

The restitution sacrifice was normally offered to atone for sins against the Lord's holy property but since the text focuses on the person's purification, not their forgiveness, this offering more likely had a cleansing function. This idea is strengthened by 2 deviation, or modifications, from the normal restitution offering rite; both of which are in keeping with a cleansing goal. 1<sup>st</sup>, the priest takes some of the sacrificial blood – the most powerful cleansing agent available in ancient Israel – and applied it to the person's extremities: the right ear lobe, the right thumb and the right big toe. These extremities represent the whole body, so that by placing the blood there, the priest brought the entire person into a higher state of purity.

Next, along with the restitution offering, the priest presents a log of oil (1.3-

2.3 cups). He sprinkled some of it before the Lord 7 times, an act meant to consecrate the sanctuary on account of the defilement caused by the person's impurity. He then also applied some of the oil to the person's extremities, on top of the blood that was already there, to imitate the blood purifying function. He then emphasizes this purification by pouring the remaining oil on the person's head, an act that also moved the person to a higher level of purity.

If you will recall, this is the same action that was used in the consecration of priests (8:22-24). The application of the blood on the extremities, much like that of the priests, suggested a "rite of passage" concept. Just as the priest is moved from the status of commoner to that of a holy priest, so the skin-diseased person is moved from the realm of death (impurity) to the realm of life (purity). This ritual also affirmed and declared the radical change that happened to the restored individual. He was a new person, born again as it were and his life belonged to God in a special way. After the oil was applied to the extremities, the remainder was applied in a way more reminiscent of the way kings and priests were anointed, by pouring it on their heads. This also implied their special status before the Lord.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> sacrifice is the purification offering (19a) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> is the burnt offering (19b-20). When these 2 offerings occur together elsewhere in Scripture, it's always in the context of purifying a major impurity. In these contexts, the purification offering removed the impurity from both the tabernacle and the offeror, while the burnt offering atoned for the offeror's general sinfulness and expressed thanksgiving and praise to the Lord for His gracious favor, both of which would be appropriate in this instance. Also, where these 2 offerings occur together, one of the animals is usually a bird. The fact that 2 flock animals are required makes this a much more costly offering, which implies the impurity being cleansed here is much more severe.

The section concludes by stating that the priests make atonement for the person. This is a wonderful declaration that means that the individual is now completely pure and may fully reintegrate into the covenant community's life and worship. The despair that resulted from contracting a defiling skin disease must have been intense. By contrast, the joy of being declared clean would have been unspeakable! Praise God for His grace and merciful healing power!

**21-32** – Since many Israelite would be too poor to afford all the animals required for the necessary offerings, especially if they have been exiled outside the camp for any period of time, this passage identifies less costly offerings that the poor could bring. This ensured that all Israelites could come before the Lord, regardless of their financial situation. Such compassion for the poor is the hallmark of biblical religion.

2 concessions are made: the offeror could bring less fine flour for the grain offering and they could substitute birds for the flock animals required for the purification and burnt offerings. Despite the differences in the offerings, the end result is exactly the same: atonement brought full cleansing, ritual purity and acceptance back into covenant society!

**33-57** – This last section deals with houses infected with some sort of growth. Since the Israelites were residing in tents, these laws were meant to apply to the land of Canaan. If impurity was found on any wall, the house was to be emptied, so that nothing else in the house would be declared unclean, then a priestly home inspector came by and closed it up. If, after 7 days, the contamination had spread, it was to be torn out so that the impurity was removed from Israel's midst. These impure building materials were then transferred to a designated place – a garbage dump of impurity – to ensure they weren't used again by anyone else. The plaster was scraped off the house's inside walls and another waiting period is implied. If the contamination has spread, the house is torn down completely. If it hasn't spread, the priest would pronounce the house clean, perform similar cleansing rituals and the house could be repaired and safely used as a dwelling.

How is this purification process beneficial to believers today? In a remarkable way, many aspects of this unusual rite points to the future work of the Messiah, who would come to cleanse those stained with the defilement of sin. The first unusual thing we notice is the priest had to go outside the camp to minister to the healed person. This is the only place in Leviticus where the priest goes outside the camp as part of a reclamation project. In all other occasions, the priest carries the carcass or ashes of a sacrificial animal to dispose of them and rid the camp of impurity. This is the only time they go outside the camp in order to bring someone declared unclean back into the camp.

This is a clear analogy to the work of Jesus Christ, who has gone outside the camp, to a far country even, to redeem that which was lost. In fact, the Book of **Hebrews** points to this very analogy when it says in **13:12**, “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate.” But here, Jesus is seen as both the priest and the victim who suffered outside the gate. When He ministered here on earth, Jesus was called a friend of tax collectors and sinners (**Lk 7:34**). He even compared Himself to a doctor helping his needy patients (**Mt 9:13**). As the Great Physician, Jesus makes house calls and comes to sinners right where they are. But, whereas the priest went out to investigate and determine if the victim was really healed; Jesus comes to us to heal us of the sickness of sin. Jesus Christ has gone to extravagant lengths to procure our redemption.

There are other parallels to this unusual ritual and the atoning work of Christ. Birds don't belong in clay pots, they belong in the heavens. Likewise, Jesus came down from heaven and became a man, putting Himself into a clay pot (earthen vessel) so that He might die for our sins. The running water over which the bird was killed points us to the Holy Spirit of God, and Jesus offered Himself to God as the perfect sacrifice for our sins through the eternal Spirit (**Heb 9:14**). When the blood-stained living bird was turned loose, it pictured our Lord's resurrection, which is just as much a part of the gospel message as His death. Only a living Savior can save dead sinners. It also pictured His ascension, for bearing the mark of sacrifice, the living bird flew away, ascending to the heavens and out of sight.

You may not think that this ritual or the work of Christ has any real bearing on you personally. If so, you're not fully aware of the extent of your own infection. God created a perfect world with no sickness, no death and no sin. He also gave just 1 command to the first humans (Adam and Eve) and told them that disobedience to that 1 command would bring death. Of course, it wasn't God's plan for Adam and Eve to die immediately. They did experience immediate spiritual death as their sin separated them from God. Physically, it took many years for their bodies to deteriorate until they finally died. In fact, Adam lived to be 930 yrs old. Still, sin affected his body and he eventually died, but sin's effects worked slowly. Since that time, sin has had a profound and undeniable effect on the human race. Sickness exists because of sin.

Now, according to God's law, as seen in Leviticus, skin diseases made people unclean and as such, they weren't allowed to enter the tabernacle area. Sin separated them from the place of worship. In the same way today, sin separates us from God. It makes it impossible for us to have a relationship with God, which is ironically unsettling because that is exactly what we were created to do; sin has destroyed that for us.

But sin doesn't just destroy our ability to have a relationship with God; sin actually destroys us. Whether you know it or not; whether you believe it or not, sin is slowly but surely destroying your temporal life here on earth and, if it is not corrected, it will destroy your eternal life. Sin isn't simply an inability to do right, it's literally a spiritual cancer. Nobody ever wakes up one day and says, "I have cancer." The overwhelming majority of people affected by cancer don't even know they have it until it is diagnosed by a trained medical professional. But, even though they're ignorant of cancer's presence, that doesn't stop it from growing, destroying healthy cells and spreading throughout the body.

Sin operates the same way. It often hides undetected in the hidden places of your heart but it doesn't stay hidden. By its very nature, sin is progressive and its effects grow worse over time. It may seem harmless and insignificant at first but sin is insidious. We can deceive ourselves about how lethal sin is but that doesn't prevent it from destroying us no more than refusing to go to the doctor relieves an afflicted person from the ravages of cancer. On the contrary, delaying treatment allows cancer to destroy even more. Our text deals with defiling skin diseases but sin is deeper than the skin; it spreads, it defiles, it isolates – sin is fit only for the fire.

But thankfully, while there's no sure cure for leprosy or cancer, there is a cure for sin. The process of purification from skin disease was gradual; it involved many steps. We too have a process to follow when sin has made us unfit to be in God's presence. It involves confession, repentance and seeking God's presence in prayer and worship. All our spiritual progress is gradual. When we put our faith in Jesus we immediately move from a state of spiritual death to one of spiritual life, but our sinful flesh is still present. Christians can and do sin, so we still need help in dealing with our sin problem. God gives that help in His forgiveness, His cleansing and His sanctifying power in us.



How do we access God's forgiveness and cleansing? God gives it in response to our honest prayer of confession. Part of our process of cleansing is the prayer of confession. What prevents us from being healed of the ravages of sin? We can't be healed as long as we defend our sin and make excuses instead of confessing it. When we excuse our sin instead of humbling ourselves and confessing it, we allow our pride to resist confession and we miss God's cleansing. Confession is necessary for cleansing and so is allowing God to speak to us and change us through His word. John 17:17 tells us that God uses His Word to sanctify us, to make us holy, and He uses our prayer of confession to cleanse us.

Will you be cleansed today? Will you free yourself from the ravages of sin and be moved from a state of spiritual death to that of spiritual life? You can be by accepting Christ's sacrifice for your sins; a sacrifice accomplished fully and completely by the shedding of His blood on the cross. 😊