

The Red Heifer, Clean Feet, and Beauty for Ashes

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Washed Once — and Yet the Feet Get Dirty

Revelation 1:5 contains a statement of immovable finality: to Him who loves us and has washed us from our sins in His blood. The tense is decisive — not washes us repeatedly, but has washed us. This is not a process to be renewed with each sin. The blood of Christ was shed once, its application was once, and it is effective forever. For any system of professed Christianity that treats the Lord's Table as a fresh sacrifice, or that applies the blood anew with each act of priestly service, there is no scriptural basis. The work is finished.

And yet none of us can say that our sinning is over. We are still in this world, and the world is a dirty place, and our walk through it leaves its mark. This is the picture the Lord taught in John 13, when He rose from supper and washed His disciples' feet. Peter's initial refusal — thou shalt never wash my feet — drew from the Lord one of the most searching statements of the chapter: unless I wash thee, thou hast not part with me. He that has washed all over needs not to wash save his feet, but is wholly clean.

The complete washing — the bath — had already taken place. The blood of Christ had been shed. But the feet were dirty from walking through a dirty world, and dirty feet cannot have communion with the Lord. That is the practical teaching. Not the blood reapplied, but the water — the Word of God applied by the Spirit, bringing the soul back into the consciousness of what it means that Christ died, and restoring fellowship with Him.

Numbers 19 — The Red Heifer and the Water of Separation

Numbers 19 is the provision God made in the wilderness for exactly this problem. It is not among the offerings of Leviticus, which all look at the cross from various angles and have to do with the question of the sinner's standing before God. This is a provision for the wilderness — for what happens as the people walk through a defiling world on their way to the promised land.

The heifer is described in terms that unmistakably point to Christ: without blemish externally, without defect internally, and upon which never came a yoke. He did no sin; in Him was no sin. And the yoke that the heifer could not have had was the yoke of sin — the slavery under which all of Adam's race serves from birth. This is not contradicted by the Lord's invitation in Matthew 11:28 to take His yoke upon us, because His yoke is one of obedience and submission to God, which is easy and light. It is the opposite of the heavy yoke of sin.

The heifer is slaughtered outside the camp — and Hebrews 13 picks this up directly, that the Lord suffered without the camp, outside the sphere of religious profession, outside the city. The sacrifice takes place where only the priest bears witness. Those three hours of darkness on the cross, when the Lord was made sin and bore God's judgment — who witnessed that? Not the bystanders, not the mockers, not the professional religious. It was entirely between the Son and the Father, witnessed by God alone. That was sufficient. That was all it needed to be.

*Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer,
without blemish, wherein is no defect, and upon which never came yoke.
— Numbers 19:2*

The Ashes and the Running Water

After the heifer is burned, its ashes are gathered and stored outside the camp in a clean place. Everything connected with this — the burning, the gathering, the applying — renders everyone involved unclean until the evening. That is itself a

lesson: sin is not a small matter to handle lightly. Even when acting for God in a work of restoration, having to do with sin has a defiling character. Whether you fight with a chimney sweep or embrace him, you will get dirty. Those who faithfully deal with sinning brethren are tainted by the contact; they are unclean until the evening.

Into those ashes, running water is poured. The combination is then sprinkled with hyssop on those who have been defiled — on the tent, on the vessels, on the person who touched something associated with death. Death in this context speaks of the end of sin: what man earns by living in sin is death. To touch the dead body was to be contaminated with the evidence of sin's ultimate consequence.

The running water is the activity of the Holy Spirit. What the Spirit does when the soul has sinned is to bring before the conscience what it cost Christ for that sin to be forgiven. This is not the blood applied again — it is the ashes of the heifer: a reminder of what was wholly and utterly burned up in that sacrifice outside the camp. The little white lie, the careless word, the impure thought — the Spirit applies the ashes to the soul and says: that thing required the death of Christ. Do not take it lightly.

There are two steps. On the third day the unclean person must grapple with the fact that this sin was awful in God's eyes and Christ had to die for it. That is conscience engaged. Only then, on the seventh day, is communion restored. The man who does not submit to the third-day sprinkling will not be clean on the seventh day either. Restoration of fellowship is not automatic. It requires that the soul has truly reckoned with the cost of its sin, not just moved past it.

The Effect of Sin on Others

Numbers 19 does not limit the defilement to the one who sinned. Everyone in the tent was unclean. Every vessel in the tent was unclean. Every person who came

to help was unclean until the evening. Sin does not stay contained to the sinner. It spreads uncleanness to those around him, and even to those who faithfully and lovingly come to deal with it.

We tend to think of our sin as a private matter — between me and God, affecting no one else. Numbers 19 gives the lie to that. My sin has an effect on those I live and serve and worship with. When I am in an unclean state, others are affected. The restoration of my communion is not merely my personal concern; it touches the whole household.

Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet were cast into the fire with the heifer. Cedar is the grandest thing in nature — tall, enduring, the symbol of what man considers his greatest achievements. Hyssop is a weed growing out of a wall — the meanest, most negligible thing in nature. Scarlet is the royal colour. All of it is thrown into the fire. Everything that man would put forward — his highest attainments or his most contemptible aspects, his royal pretensions or his insignificance — all of it is burned up together. The flesh has nothing to contribute to what is happening here.

Beauty for Ashes — The Hope Beyond the Cleansing

Hebrews 10 brings the two things together: the once-for-all offering and what that enables. Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water, let us hold fast the profession of the hope without wavering. The cleansing leads to the hope. A soul in an unclean state has no joy in the hope of the Lord's coming. When a child has done something wrong and knows their father is aware of it, they are not particularly glad to hear that father is coming home. But a soul that has had the ashes applied — that has grappled with the cost of its sin on the third day and received the restoration on the seventh — that soul can hold fast to the hope without wavering.

Hebrews 6 takes us further: we have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us, which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, entering into that within the veil. This is not a sinner running to the blood for refuge. This is a saint running to the hope of glory from the wreck of everything here. Those wrecks are real. The failures, the sins, the disappointments — they are real, and they leave their mark. But the anchor holds within the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, Jesus, made a High Priest forever.

Isaiah 61 gives the final word: to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes. The ash heap is not the end of the story. Pottery glazes were once made from ash — ground up, mixed with water and minerals, fired again, they produced the most beautiful finish on the vessel. The ashes of the heifer, applied with running water, restore the one who has sinned to communion. The ashes of our failures, mixed with the Word of God and submission to the Lord, are turned in His hands into something beautiful. That is the master Potter's work in the earthen vessel.

To give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. — Isaiah 61:3
