

The Ashes of the Red Heifer

Peace and Communion · Numbers 19

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It is a purification for sin (Num. 19:9).

In our previous meditations, we have been endeavoring to learn from Scripture the ground on which our fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ, has been established; we have also looked at Lev. 11 as a sample of what Scripture types teach, as to what must be chosen and loved, and what must be refused and abhorred, in order to maintain the life and walk which the communion of the Holy Ghost {2 Cor. 13:14}

enjoins. As a matter of fact, however, the child of God has often painfully to acknowledge, that he does not practically maintain this communion. He has to deplore contracting defilement, if not to judge himself every now and then for positive disobedience. Thus communion is interrupted; for, though the Father loves us, He cannot walk with His children on any principle of uncleanness. Nor does the child of God desire it, for he hates sin wherever he finds it. It is then good to know that for defilement, however contracted, God has graciously made provision. In the New Testament we are told that, If any man

(i.e. any child of God) sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous {1 John 2:1};

and the Lord Jesus is also blessedly set before us as the Washer of His servants' feet, to cleanse away the defilement they may have contracted. In the Old Testament great principles of truth of a similar character are brought out; not only in the discipline of Jehovah's servants on account of failure, and for their restoration, but also details are given of the deep and varied exercises of soul, which the elect remnant of Jews will pass through, before they are turned away from their transgressions, thoroughly restored, and brought by divine grace into their promised liberty and blessing. Moreover, in early days, directions were largely given for detecting and removing uncleanness and defilement, whether it be through touching a dead bone, or by a man dying in a tent; or even if it be leprosy itself, either in the individual, his garment, or the house of any of those who belonged to the camp of Israel, where Jehovah was dwelling. We now turn to Num. 19, because the ordinance of the red heifer shows not only that the allowance of defilement was strictly forbidden, but also that the gracious way of restoration, when defilement had been contracted, was according to the holiness of God. The subject is of all-importance; not that it treats of restoration from flagrant transgressions, for it does not; but because it shows how small a matter is enough to check and hinder communion, and this sometimes from circumstances over which we have had no control, as a man dying in a tent defiling all that were in it; and yet we find, in

every instance, the exact way of restoration graciously provided. It reads lessons specially to us, who are travelling on to our rest through a region of sin and death; for it treats of uncleanness, and the purification of those, who, belonging to God, were in their wilderness journey. This is why, perhaps, we have the ordinance of the red heifer in Numbers, which records Israel's way through the wilderness, and not in the book of Leviticus, which treats of grace and holiness, specially in regard to approaching God. The ordinance of the red heifer stands alone. While other sacrifices are often brought before us, this is recorded in no other part of Israel's history; nor is there any account of its being repeated. The ashes of the burnt heifer were, or should have been, preserved all along the journey; because all was intended to prefigure the sacrifice of Christ once offered, and never to be repeated. The efficacy of His sacrifice being everlasting, there was no need of repetition. It perfected for ever. Hence we read, There remaineth no more sacrifice for sins {Heb. 10:26}.

The red heifer has the character of a sin-offering. The "ashes" stand prominently in the chapter. They were laid up without the camp in a clean place, and kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for a water of separation: it is a purification for sin (Num. 19:9).

This was the purifying power God provided. There was no other way of being freed from such defilement, and restored to the camp, than by being sprinkled with the ashes of the heifer. Even then it was only a ceremonial cleansing, called in Scripture that which sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh {Heb. 9:13};

but we have deeply solemn lessons to learn from its typical import. May we hearken to the voice of God with attentive and anointed ears! The heifer provided for this sacrifice must be red -- a most rare and difficult thing to find in the world, among the thousands of cattle on its hills, one heifer answering completely to this description. It must also be without spot; neither should it be one with the least blemish, nor ever have been yoked with others as thus under the rule of man. All this was needful in order to be a fit type of Jesus the Son of God, who was emphatically a Lamb without blemish and without spot {1 Pet. 1:19},

and always set apart for God. He was holy, harmless, undefiled {see Heb. 7:26};

and, instead of being yoked for men's purposes, He was separate from sinners {Heb. 7:26}.

The heifer having been found in all respects fit for the

sacrifice, it was then slain; thus shadowing forth Him who not only offered Himself without spot to God {Heb. 9:14},

but who died for our sins {1 Cor. 15:3}, suffered for sins the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God {1 Pet. 3:18}.

The precious death of Jesus the Son of God was thus solemnly set forth, who was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities {see Isa. 53:5}.

May we always think of it with adoring and worshiping hearts! The sacrifice having been killed, one of the priests (not Aaron, the high priest, but Eleazer, his son) took the blood, and sprinkled it

before the tabernacle of the congregation seven times {Num. 19:4},

which is the place of communion; for the subject here is not justification, but communion. It was sprinkled seven times, not round about the altar, but before the tabernacle, to represent where we meet God, and to show the ground of communion perfectly established. The rest of the blood, and every part of the heifer, including her skin and her dung -- the whole sacrifice -- was burnt. In the midst of the burning of the heifer, the priest cast in scarlet, cedar wood, and hyssop, because they set forth the royalty, incorruptibility, and lowliness of Jesus, and the whole was consumed under the fire, which represented divine judgment. The burning continued till all was reduced to ashes. The ashes were gathered up by a clean man, and laid up without the camp in a clean place, to be kept for a purification for sin; for the ashes were mixed with running water (Num. 19:9). They shall take of the ashes of the burnt heifer of purification for sin, and running water shall be put thereto in a vessel: and a clean person shall take hyssop, and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it, &c. (Num. 19:17, 18).

Observe, all was done without the camp, the killing of the heifer, the burning of the heifer, the laying-up of the ashes, and the sprinkling of the unclean; for here it was that the defiled were: they were apart from the sanctuary of God; they were outside the camp, because of their uncleanness. The Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Command the children of Israel, that they put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is defiled by the dead: both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them; that they defile not their camps, IN THE MIDST WHEREOF I DWELL (Num. 5:1-3).

It is important also to notice that all who were employed in the work of removing the defilement from others contracted uncleanness themselves. And do we ever deal with evil, or seek to set others right who have gone wrong, without ourselves contracting defilement? It is very serious, and yet most instructive.

As to this, we learn in this chapter: 1. That the priest who sprinkled the blood, and cast the things into the burning of the heifer, was unclean until the even, and had to wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water before he could come into the camp (Num. 19:7). 2. The man who had burnt the heifer had to wash his clothes in water, and bathe his flesh in water, and was unclean until the even (Num. 19:8). 3. The clean man who gathered up the ashes had also to wash his clothes, and be unclean until the even (Num. 19:10). 4. The clean person who sprinkled the water of separation upon the unclean had also to wash his clothes; and he that touched the water of separation was unclean until even (Num. 19:21). Surely nothing could more strikingly bring before us the solemnity of having to do with evil in others, and the need of those who are occupied in setting others right being themselves spiritual, and given to watchfulness and self-judgment; and being also in the spirit of meekness and fear, lest they themselves become defiled. Seeing, then, how difficult it is to have to do with uncleanness in anyone without becoming defiled ourselves, we do well to take heed to the apostolic injunction on this subject: Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness: considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

How forcibly this ordinance of the red heifer reminds us that God would have the people, among whom He was dwelling, to be in that state, and to manifest that conduct, which were suited to His own holy presence! Nothing of death, no, not even the touch of a dead body {Num. 19:11},

or of a bone of a man {Num. 19:16},

could suit the sanctuary of Jehovah {see Num. 19:11};

for death in man witnessed of sin being connected with it -By man came death {1 Cor. 15:21},

as well as sin, for death is the wages of sin. It could not possibly therefore be a light thing for any of those among whom Jehovah was dwelling to touch a dead body. We therefore read: He that toucheth the dead body of any man shall be unclean seven days (Num. 19:11).

We saw in Lev. 11, that for touching the carcase of an unclean beast the man was only unclean till even, but here for touching the dead body of a man he was unclean seven days. The reason of the difference is obvious; for man is connected with sin as well as death. For his purification God graciously provided the water of separation, of which the defiled man should avail himself; and that not only because of his personal uncleanness

excluding him from the camp, but because, by his having thus contracted uncleanness, he defileth the tabernacle of the Lord {Num. 19:13}.

to be known, before he could be fully restored. This, in our case, as to time, may be short or long. But the Israelite who had been defiled must realize as facts:

Refusing to purify himself was a most serious delinquency.

1. That he is unclean, and therefore outside the camp.

Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of Jehovah; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel: because the water of separation was not sprinkled upon him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is yet upon him (Num. 19:13).

2. That by his uncleanness he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.

Again it is said, The man that shall be unclean, and shall not purify himself, that soul shall be cut off from among the congregation, because he hath defiled the sanctuary of Jehovah: the water of separation hath not been sprinkled upon him; he is unclean (Num. 19:20).

3. That his heart bows under the sense of it, as one among whom God dwells. 4. That he has availed himself of the water of separation, and is cleansed. But more. We are told, He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean: but if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean (Num. 19:12).

What a serious thing to be “cut off” by God!

Thus in the man’s restoration there are two stages:

Nothing can exceed the clear and decisive instruction of these verses; and nothing could more forcibly convey to us the need of practical holiness in order to walk with God, or show the impossibility of our continuing in the enjoyment of fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ, while careless and not self-judged. We are not our own. We are the children of God, and He is righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works. Sin is no trifle. Not only would He require us to

1. Up to the third day he is conscious day and night of what it is to be defiled, to teach us that God would have us to be clearly and thoroughly conscious of the gravity of it; then on the third day he is sprinkled with the water of purification for sin. 2. From the third to the seventh day he is conscious of having been sprinkled, but not able to come into the camp in the full sense of cleansing. Then he is sprinkled again, washes his clothes, and himself, and after that at even he is clean.

have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness {Eph. 5:11},

And the clean person shall sprinkle upon the unclean on the third day, and on the seventh day: and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, and wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and shall be clean at even (Num. 19:19).

but not even to touch the unclean thing; so that while we cleave to that which is good, it equally becomes us to abhor that which is evil {Rom. 12:9}.

And when sensible of interrupted communion, we should at once give ourselves to self-examination, self-judgment, and the confession of our sins, in order not only to have the assurance from His own word of forgiveness, but the consciousness of being thoroughly cleansed. To us, we know, all comes through the advocacy of Jesus Christ the righteous, and upon propitiation made, and is brought home to us by the action of the Holy Ghost applying the word to wash away the defilement. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Thus we are clean, and restored to this wondrous privilege of fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. But this action of restoration does not give us the idea of either a slight or a rapid process. We know that sometimes a considerable period of time is involved, before those who have been conscious of uncleanness are fully restored. It is a point in this ordinance not to be overlooked. As we have seen, the man was unclean “seven days,” during which the process of restoration was to be going on. Seven, in typical language, means that which is complete; from which we learn that a period, perfectly adequate, must pass, for certain experiences

The ashes having had running or living, (not stagnant or impure,) water, put thereto in a vessel, shows us that the word testifying of Jesus who once suffered for our sins, and was made sin for us, when brought home to our souls by the power of the Holy Ghost, is the cleansing remedy for restoring us from defilement to communion with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. It is not, as many have wrongly supposed, a fresh application of the blood of Christ, because by that one offering we have been perfected for ever; but it is the word, which testifies of Jesus in His finished work of redemption,

applied with cleansing power to our consciences by the Holy Ghost. How often have we found that, after confession of our sins, and the belief, too, that He has been faithful and just to forgive, our souls have not been consciously and happily restored to communion; but when the word is brought to bear on our hearts and consciences by the Holy Ghost, giving us the sense of being really cleansed from all unrighteousness {see 1 John 1:9},

then we realize that our communion is not only restored, but is often deeper and happier than before. We are restored, then, by the washing of water by the word. The same principles apply as to other forms of defilement, whether of a personal or of a congregational character. Personally we may be defiled by contact with the smallest amount of uncleanness --

a bone of a man

as much as a dead body {Num. 19:16},

because with God it is not merely a question of the amount of evil, but of any evil; and the path of the faithful is to depart from iniquity. A grave

is also defiling, because it is connected with sin and death. A man slain with a sword in the open fields {Num. 19:16},

being touched, also defiled. It may refer to our again turning to that which has been already judged and separated from. Observe, it is "one slain," reminding us of sin by man, and death by sin. But a man dying in a tent, and defiling all in the tent, and all that came into it, shows how congregationally a little leaven leavens the whole lump; and how God will have us, as His assembly, exercised about being clean congregationally as well as individually. All who were in the tent were then to take the place of humiliation, confession, and to be cleansed by the water of purification, before they could resume their place as connected with the sanctuary of the Lord. Things exposed, which ought to be covered, are also unclean, as an open vessel, which hath no covering bound upon it (Num. 19:15).

This mode of defiling must not be overlooked. How important then it is to see that sin is a most serious matter, and that communion can only be maintained on principles that are suitable to the Father and the Son; nor is it possible that the Holy Ghost could lead us to walk in any other path. No doubt it entails such watchfulness and constant dependence, that walking carelessly, not to say with levity, is altogether out of the question. The smallest contact with uncleanness is defiling, and walking for a moment after the flesh is damaging. An impure thought may interrupt communion; hence we are admonished to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul; and to cast down imaginations [reasonings], and bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. But how wonderfully has divine grace provided for us, in the advocacy of the Lord Jesus, the ministry of the indwelling Spirit, and the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever! What lessons of holiness and grace all have to learn in the school of God! Our souls are astonished at the infinite wisdom of God to us-ward, as well as His power and grace, as we grow in the knowledge of His truth! Dreadful as it is, and so wholly unbecoming those who are born of God to sin, that he says, My children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not {see 1 John 2:1};

yet, if we should sin, His gracious provision forbids our desponding, but encourages us to pour out our troubled hearts to Him in confession. Thus the Holy Ghost directs us to Him in the glory, the Washer of our feet; and while making us sensible of our uncleanness having interrupted communion, brings home with power the infinite virtue of what was done

for us on Calvary, as revealed in holy Scripture. Thus, as the defiled Israelites were sprinkled with the ashes of an heifer {Heb. 9:13},

so the Holy Ghost brings to our hearts and consciences the eternal efficacy of the one offering of Christ; and as the one outside the camp defiled by the dead had also to bathe his flesh and wash his clothes, so we prove, to our soul's comfort, what it is to have ourselves, and our near surroundings, brought under the cleansing action of the word, and thus again to have fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).