

Numbers 19

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[0 : 00] I've been the minister of this church for 15 years, and I think that Numbers 19 is the most peculiar passage in the Bible that I've ever had to read out.

! I don't know whether you picked it up in the reading, but to think about a bottle with ashes in it. We read, didn't we, that the people thought that this bottle with ashes cleansed them from the kind of contamination that had come upon them, and how they become contaminated.

They become contaminated, every example in Numbers 19 is by death. Something about death polluted the people in several different ways.

And when we think about death, we know, don't we, some of you know only too well, that death is something that is disturbing. We know that in our culture. The way that we react to death in our lives, it's a major event, isn't it? It's a life-defining event in some ways.

And I don't mean this in a wrong way, but death causes untold inconvenience. I don't mean by that because death is annoying, although it is that.

[1 : 22] But death puts you out. If someone in your family dies, nothing is quite the same, is it? Everything is up in the air. Nothing is allowed to go on as normal.

It messes up things. I don't mean it in the sense of inconvenience. But it does mess things up. It interrupts. And there's funerals to arrange.

There's the nature of grief itself, which is so debilitating. And there's having to deal with what has been left behind, and the difficulties of that.

And at every step of that process, the hurt and the grief and the sorrow, that some of you know far more than I do. The nature of death is something that interrupts.

And our reaction to death is nearly always to stand back from it and grieve. Having to cope with our sorrow. And our reaction is to know, yes, it does put us out.

[2 : 25] There are all kinds of duties and responsibilities as we have to react to death. But I think in our culture, and I've not been able to find anything written on this in this week in looking at it, do we ever feel unclean about death?

It's just not what we feel. It's one of those Levitical words, isn't it? Words from Leviticus. And it's strange to us.

It's kind of uncleanness. And so here is a whole chapter in Leviticus 19 that's devoted to kind of, in Numbers 19, a whole Levitical worldview.

In dealing with the uncleanness or the pollution that falls upon us because of death. It's not the way that we react. I'm now unclean because of death.

I'm now polluted because of death. We don't think like that. Maybe you think, well, if there's some deadly disease or if there's a virus, a super virus, maybe Ebola, we think, okay. There are all kinds of contaminants.

[3 : 35] But it's not our usual first reaction to death. We react in terms of grief. But not in terms of uncleanness.

But it's something that's really very, very important in the kind of world of the Torah in Genesis to Deuteronomy. And you might think, well, this just sounds odd and strange and bizarre.

In fact, as you read Numbers 19, it does sound quite superstitious, doesn't it? They were doing. Maybe actually you know, don't you, or you've seen people with bottles of water that they sprinkle on the dead.

It's actually a Roman Catholic practice. And then you read a chapter like this and you think, well, I'm not superstitious. But should I be putting some ashes on it?

Red heifer, that is. It seems, doesn't it, Numbers 19, backward and primitive. Remember, there is a veil.

[4 : 42] There is a veil between the Old Testament and the New Testament. A curtain. The Apostle Paul speaks of that veil, that curtain, being ripped open by the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

Andrew Bonner, in his great commentary on Leviticus, says, We need to look on both sides of the curtain. And that is strange for us, because we're looking back, aren't we? And we're looking back to something that's on the Old Testament side of the curtain.

But I want to tell you tonight, we've got to view Numbers 19 from our side of the curtain as well. We've got to pick our heads around. And there's something here which tells us about the Lord Jesus. There's something here which tells us about the Gospel, which is very, very encouraging. And so we're going to try and look on both sides of the curtain. So let's ask the first question, what is so dreadful about death? And particularly to look on the Old Testament side of the curtain. What is so dreadful about death? About touching a dead person? Or touching a grave? Or touching a bone even? That is polluting. And then you become unclean.

[5 : 48] And because you become unclean, you make other people unclean. Like contaminant. What is so dreadful about death? In Numbers 19. But our reaction today is grief, isn't it?

The grief that it causes, and that is true. We mustn't be naive. People in the Old Testament, they grieved when someone died. But it's not simply here speaking of the nature of sorrow. Health, then, you might think. It's a primitive culture. They live in tents. It's true that there were some health risks, obviously, with a dead body. But it wasn't that either. It has to do with particular cultural approaches to funerals.

Is that what you think? There are, aren't there, astonishing differences in funerals. I've taken a funeral in London of a West Indian man.

And then to take a funeral of somebody from the highlands of Scotland. They were very, very different occasions. One had an open coffin and was very, very loud.

[6 : 50] The other one, well, I was the only one singing. I was seemingly the only one who would talk at all. They're very different. Now, according to Numbers 19, death is something that makes us unclean.

Death is something that pollutes. And it's so serious that the pollution that is caused by death has to be dealt with. Why is death so dreadful?

So dreadful, everything in me says, why must death be dealt with in the way that this passage teaches? Every example of being contaminated by death and making sure that you've got the right and proper remedy for contamination.

Why? Why is this chapter here? What was it saying to the people on the Old Testament side of the curtain? It took me ages to figure it out. But actually it's really simple.

It's very simple. Because any contact with death is contact with the curse that fell upon man because of sin.

[7 : 57] You're touching something that is experiencing the effect of the curse. Death and contact with death is viewed as polluting and contaminating in that Old Testament world. Because it's something that brought you face to face with the curse of God.

That has fallen on us because of sin. So in other words, to understand Numbers 19, you've got to go to Genesis 3. And the Garden of Eden to understand what is happening here. And why the directions are so stark.

And so astonishing to us. In the Garden of Eden, God had made it really, really clear. That on the day you eat of the fruit of the knowledge of the tree of good and evil, you will surely die. Another way to put it is the way that Paul puts it in the New Testament.

He says the wages of sin. What sin pays you is death. And do you see what the Old Testament is saying? Almost in a profound show and tell way.

You know show and tell in school? You take an object in and you show it and you explain by that object something. That's what the Old Testament is doing.

[9 : 04] The show and tell is that to touch the dead person is to be touching the curse. And if we were touching the curse, it means that we're having contact with sin. And that is why we cannot be anywhere near God.

Because God has to be an extreme and ultimate distance away from all that is sinful. And any contact with sin cannot be endured. And I think we need to remember that.

That is why we're being shown here in a spiritual show and tell kind of way. It's a profound reorientation. A change in your thinking about how we think of life.

And about how we think of death. There's quite an argument, isn't there, in our culture that death is natural. That it's the most natural thing that happens to us.

But the Word of God reorientates our view of that. And it reminds us that death happens because we fell under the curse of God.

[10:08] Because we disobeyed God. Because we sinned. Because we transgressed. In other words, and those of you who've lost loved ones, you know this. Death is not natural. Death is not the way life is meant to be.

Nobody goes to the crematorium and just thinks, this is where I was meant to be, isn't it? Nobody thinks that. In fact, non-Christians never think that.

We often comfort ourselves with this nonsense that it's just a natural end of life. The man at the crematorium said to me once, one goes in, one comes out. It's a false comfort that death is natural. Death is the curse taking its effect. It is a reminder of our very nature of rebellion against God. The living God. Think theologically about that. Think, God is the living God, isn't he?

So, death is therefore in opposition to the living God. Where does death fit in the being of the realm of the being of God? It's a curse. Think of the holiness of God.

[11:16] Death is a contradiction, isn't it, of the holiness of God. Because death is associated with sin, not with holiness. And that is why the passage is saying there has to be this separation.

Everything death touches has to be separate. It's teaching us to think biblically. It's a certain line that when you finish the biblical line from death that runs through being unclean.

It's a line which goes to the curse and to the fall and to sin and the effects of sin in our most profound sense. We try to overlook it. We tend not to think in these terms.

And that is because naturally when we think of death we think of grief. Our own grief. We think of sorrow and separation. We think of how it will change our lives and affect us for the rest of our lives. But I think it is helpful here. It's a reminder that death shows us that we fall short of the glory of God and left to ourselves we would not be in the presence of God.

[12:19] That's the first thing. Why is death such a contaminating thing in Old Testament terms? It's a reminder that this is not what it was meant to be. The nature of sin.

The second thing is what does this passage teach us about God? What does this passage teach us about God? Teaches us about a God who takes steps to deal with that curse.

Again, remember we're hearing, aren't we, this in Old Testament terms. Behind the curtain, before we hear it in the New Testament. This God who takes steps to deal with the curse.

And the way that it's polluted us. I want us to look at it from two angles. First from the red heifer. And then secondly from those who were involved in preparing it. The red heifer is unique. Why is it unique?

That is the unique thing in the passage. In terms of Old Testament sacrifice. It's different from all the other kind of sacrifices. Why? Well first of all it involved a red heifer.

[13:27] You might think, well how many red heifers were there? How many red cows were there in Israel at this time? It's the only sacrifice in the whole Levitical sacrificial system that's identified by colour.

See what? Never says a white lamb. Never says a rusty sheep. You wouldn't say that. It was about a red heifer.

And of course all the other sacrifices, like all the other sacrifices, had to be without blemish. You couldn't bring one that was going to die anyway. You couldn't choose the runt. You couldn't choose one that had bad cough at birth.

So you wouldn't lose your money anyway. No, it had to be without blemish. And it had to be about, it had to be red. What was it about the colour? And I think it's significant. That it was red because red is the colour of blood.

It's not sacrificed at the tent of meeting. It's not sacrificed at the tabernacle. We're told that it's taken outside. And we're told some of its blood. And the whole of the red heifer was burnt. And we're told about some of the parts, even the dung, aren't we?

[14:31] And that includes even the blood. That is unique. It didn't happen in any other Levitical sacrifice. The blood was all drained, but not for this one. The blood is not drained.

So there's something, isn't there? As you read the passage carefully, there's something significant about the blood, again, that keeps coming back. And it all has to be burned, including the blood.

So that when it's gathered up, the ashes are gathered up. The ashes are to have blood in them. It's burned blood, for sure. But the significance of the blood is running through them.

The ashes are burned up, and they're taken. And the ashes were to be collected and taken to a clean place. So that when they were needed, it was to be used.

There's this kind of store of red heifer ashes with blood in it. That when it was needed, a little bit of ashes could be taken, added to the water, and then sprinkled. But when they were burned, there's three other ingredients added to it.

[15 : 36] Cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet wool. Am I supposed to understand something symbolic in that? Well, I think this.

I think the three extra ingredients of cedarwood, and hyssop, and scarlet wool, they were used, if you read your Old Testament, as cleansing products in the Old Testament life.

So what you have, is you have a series of ingredients which are all involved in cleansing. And there's one of them that's the most important in terms of cleaning power, and that is the blood.

That is the most cleanse, that is the most potent cleansing power in the Levitical worldview. This blood. And uniquely, in this sacrifice, the blood is present in the whole burnt offering.

And the ashes, and in the water. And so when they spread the water on you, with the ashes in it, you are being washed with blood. And you are being washed with cedarwood, and you are being washed with hyssop, and you are being washed with scarlet wool.

[16 : 43] They're all involved. It's like making a detergent, and making it the most potent detergent that's ever been invented.

Why? Because this detergent deals with death. It deals with curse. This detergent deals with the wages of sin. And all of this is being set out in symbolic ways.

It's show and tell. For them to understand that this is the most potent cleanser. That this can deal with the curse nothing else can deal with.

And so keep that in your mind. Let's turn to the people who prepared it. Because the priest is involved in killing, but another man is involved in burning, and a different man is involved in picking up the ashes.

And then there's another man who takes the ashes and puts them in the water when you need it. It's all very strange, isn't it? It's very very peculiar. What do these four men signify? Why didn't one guy just do it all?

[17 : 43] But they were all involved in preparing this cleansing agent. Well, what is it telling you? It is this, that they too were made unclean. Well, why were they unclean?

Because they were touching death. And the effect of the curse of death came even upon them when they were helping you to do something to be cleansed from it. even in order to help us to be cleansed, they themselves became contaminated.

And that's a helpful thing because it teaches you and I that if God is going to help us to deal with the curse of sin, then in some way someone has to touch the curse of sin.

Can you see that? In some way, someone has to touch the curse of sin, otherwise none of us are going to get cleansed. Someone has to do something in order to make us right with God.

To deal with the curse. And of course, that gets us ready for the gospel, doesn't it? Because it puts Jesus on both sides of the point I'm making.

[18 : 57] He is the sacrifice. And he is the one who has become contaminated for us. In preparing it for us. In bearing it for us.

In bringing it to us. Christ himself bore the curse. And so, turn with me to Hebrews chapter 9. Okay, Hebrews chapter 9. Hebrews chapter 9.

And you will find that there's a small little phrase. Somebody shoved out the page reference there. Hebrews chapter 9. Hebrews chapter 9. Or you could mumble it.

I've been back there. Say that again. 1,005. That's great. 1,005. Hebrews chapter 9. And you will find that there's a small little phrase that's taken out in Numbers 19.

Hebrews chapter 9. Let me read you from verse 13 and 14 and 15. Where the writer of Hebrews says this. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer sanctify you for the purification of the flesh.

[20 : 06] That means make you right, set you apart, that you become pure. How much more will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Therefore, he is the mediator of a new covenant. So that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Do you notice that phrase in verse 13? You might have missed it many times. That speaks of the sprinkling of a defiled and unclean person with the ashes of a heifer. The only place where you can find the sprinkling of an ashes with a heifer in the Bible is Numbers chapter 19.

And so the writer of the Hebrews points you back to this sacrifice in Numbers 19. And he says to you Numbers 19 shows you Jesus.

It's a foreshadowing of all that Jesus would do. And you note the words have to do in these three or four verses they have to do with death and life and in particular death and everlasting life.

[21 : 17] And they have to do with an eternal inheritance because a death has occurred that redeems us from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. Now we wouldn't have seen that. We would not have seen that unless the author of the book of Hebrews had told us.

You would not have picked that up I think. And I wouldn't have picked that up. Just from reading Numbers 19. But of course the author of the book of Hebrews has told us. And so we have to see it tonight.

that you are looking at the same truth whether you read it here whether it's about a red heifer and cleansing agents and ashes. It's on that side of the curtain.

It's a little bit mysterious. But the curtain for us has been drawn back. And it is a way that is pointing forwards to the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross. And that is the only way that the curse of death can be dealt with.

by the blood of Jesus. Do you see the significance of the shedding of blood in the Old Testament? We're told uniquely aren't we?

[22 : 19] The blood was retained. The whole thing was burned. The blood is in the ashes. Blood represents life. And when blood is shed it represents a life being poured out. And it's happening here in my place.

That in order to deal with the curse that has fallen on me it is happening here so that this death deals with my death. And sanctifies my death and cleanses me.

And so my death is not understood as being a contaminant but it is understood as having been cleansed and opened up the way to heaven. And surely that is our joy isn't it?

That those who once sat and worshipped with us those loved ones who knew Christ they have passed into the presence of Jesus Christ.

And they sit or they stand worshipping him tonight. And even though they passed through the valley of the shadow of death that's what it was for them it was the valley of the shadow of death and so there was nothing to fear because his rod and staff comforted them.

[23 : 31] And that is what is true for each and every one of us who have trusted in Christ. The death of Jesus was brought about in John Owen's word the death of death in the death of Christ.

The death of death in the death of Jesus Christ. So let me turn thirdly to the fact that death is so serious that it's a reminder of the curse.

to this glorious thing that God has done for us. To you. To you. That you must come.

You must come and receive this blessing. So in Numbers 19 it was all done but you still had to go and ask. You still had to go and say I'm unclean and I'm contaminated by death please wash me, please sprinkle me, please apply the value of that death to me.

You must come and receive this blessing. Let me highlight a couple of things. I want to be done by seven o'clock. Let me highlight a couple of things. The first thing is this, there are dire consequences for not being cleansed.

[24 : 54] The dire consequences in this chapter are being put out of the camp. which means not only that you can't go to services and not only that you've been put out from the people of God but that you've moved away from the presence of God and you're not allowed to come near.

So he says it very clearly in verse 20 of Numbers chapter 9 19. This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you. Sorry, that's chapter 9.

Hebrews chapter 19. It says, if the man who is unclean does not cleanse himself, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly since he has defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.

Because the water from purity has not been thrown on him. He is unclean, he's defiled. It's a very, very simple thing to write. Sin does not enter the presence of God.

And so if your sin is not dealt with, you don't enter the presence of God. So if you're uncleaned, you don't enter into the presence of God.

[26 : 09] There are dire consequences for not accepting the cleansing power of the blood and the sacrifice that God has provided. Dire eternal consequences. But the passage is saying, isn't it, wonderably, God has provided and God is offering.

And he has provided it for all who will come. It's not accidental. Look at verse 10. Verse 10, it's a wonderful verse. And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.

And this shall be a perpetual statute for the people of Israel. And, look at this, get this, for the stranger who saw Jesus among them. And it's a reminder, isn't it, that the gospel was never just intended for the Jews, for them.

We know that in the New Testament, a Pentecost, it bursts into the whole world. It's for people everywhere come to God in Christ and be cleansed from the curse that has fallen upon us in the wages of sin.

And it's a reminder to you and I that this sacrifice that Christ has given is always effective. If you don't come, you're not cleansed. But look at verse 19, it's it.

[27 : 19] And the clean person shall sprinkle in on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day. Thus on the seventh day he shall cleanse him and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and an evening he shall be clean.

In other words, it's telling the people, isn't it, you do this, there's never any judgment work. It was stated in Old Testament ways in a show and tell to get them ready for the coming of Christ.

We don't live on that side of the curtain. So tonight I have no water of cleansing for you. I have watered a drink but there are no ashes in it.

And you don't need water with ashes. But you do need a Saviour who offers you pardons and cleansing and life. And so tonight in this peculiar passage the response that Numbers is calling for is that you thank God and you take the free grace, the free gift of his grace and you worship him and live.

Let's pray.