

Numbers Chapter 19 – The Red Heifer

Forty Years near Kadesh. The central section of the book of Numbers brings together events spanning 40 years, when the Israelites lived in and near Kadesh-barnea. Kadesh is a large oasis about 50 miles southwest of Beersheba (see map). It marked the southern limit of the land of Canaan, according to 34:4. So when Israel reached there, they were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. But as a result of the rebellion prompted by the spies' negative reports, God punished the people by making them wait 40 years to enter the land. A few important episodes from this period are recounted in chs. 15–19.

Read Numbers 19:1-22 Cleansing from Contact With Death

Life and death are the two poles of human existence, as reflected by God's instruction in Leviticus and Numbers. Holiness, God, and life are on one end of the spectrum, and uncleanness, sin, and death are on the other. Under the law of Moses, human corpses caused the gravest kind of pollution, affecting all who approached them. Thus those who have contact with the dead were required to keep away from the sanctuary and undergo cleansing outside the camp.

Why ash, and not an animal sacrifice as instructed in Leviticus? Notice that this provision for cleansing was established during the time of wandering in the desert. The ash could be transported and kept for when the cleansing was needed.

This is especially necessary at this point in history, in view of the numerous deaths reported in the preceding chapters (14:37; 15:36; 16:32, 35, 49) and those that follow (20:1, 28; 21:6, 35; 25:9; 31:7). The cleansing ash of the red heifer was necessary to cleanse every person who came into contact with death, and death was all around them.

The recipe for producing the cleansing ash (verses 1-10):

1. A **red heifer without defect ... on which a yoke has never come** (v. 2). Its youth shows its fullness of life (and fat), while its redness speaks of blood, the most effective agent of atonement.
2. **Cedarwood** and **scarlet yarn** – also red, signifying blood. Cedar oil is a natural antifungal.
3. **Hyssop** -- used for cleansing (Ps. 51:7).

These same ingredients are used in the cleansing of a leper (Lev. 14:4). The ashes are described as a sin offering (Num. 19:9), an offering designed to cleanse both the sanctuary and the worshiper (see Leviticus 4). Those engaged in making this cleansing ash paradoxically incur a mild uncleanness themselves (Num. 19:7–8, 10; see also v. 21).

The procedure for cleansing (verses 11-22):

The process of cleansing with the ash had two phases: sprinkling **water** (with some ash in it, and again using hyssop) on the affected person or tent **on the third day** after contamination and also **on the seventh day**. On the seventh day he must also **bathe himself** and **wash his clothes**. The sprinkling does not have to be done by a priest, just a **clean person**.

For Christians, clearly, the purification by sprinkling with the ashes of the red heifer, slaughtered not at the door of the tabernacle as were the other sacrifices, but outside the camp, is a foreshadowing of the purification provided by Christ. Read Hebrews 13:12-13, Hebrews 9:13-14

Read John 13:1-17

In a culture where people walk long distances on dusty roads, it was customary for a host to provide for foot-washing by a servant before a meal. Peter at first refuses, until Jesus explains the symbolism of his act; Peter then asks him to wash him completely. What does Jesus say in response? What does that mean for us?

Those who have been washed of their sins once and for all also need continual cleansing of the sins we commit because of our daily contact with a dead world. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." 1 John 1:8. In contrast, as we walk in the light of his Word, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin, and prompts us to repent.

Does church seem empty and boring? Does prayer seem stifled? It may be that we have unconfessed sin. Jesus said if we do not allow Him to wash us, we have no part in Him. John 13:8. But we can go to Him with confidence, knowing that, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9.