

Exegetical Notes, Numbers 19:1-22

"The Red Heifer"

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NUMBERS 19:1-22

Verses 1-8

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: ² "This is a requirement of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke. ³ Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴ Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the tent of meeting. ⁵ While he watches, the heifer is to be burned—its hide, flesh, blood and intestines. ⁶ The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. ⁷ After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. ⁸ The man who burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening.

- A red heifer is a cow, a female animal, not a bull. It is therefore NOT a sacrificial animal. It is slaughtered and burned outside of the camp, NOT at the altar. While the animal must be "without blemish," as are sacrificial animals; this animal is not being offered as a sacrifice to God. See Leviticus 1:3-9 for the description of how a sacrificial animal is prepared and offered. What is happening in this passage is different.
- When the animal was killed, the priest put his finger in its blood and shook his finger toward the entrance of the Tent of Meeting seven times.
- The animal was then burned entirely. No part of it was held back from the fire.
- Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn were tossed onto the burning heifer. These are items associated with cleansing in the Old Testament.
- Both the priests and the man who helped him burn the heifer must wash their bodies and their clothing before returning to the camp, but they must be regarded as unclean ceremonially until the day is over.
- There are two important historical notes regarding the activity described here. First, when the Temple was built in Jerusalem in the days of King Solomon this practice was still followed. Nine red heifers were slaughtered

throughout the time of the Temple according to rabbinical records and traditions. Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the practice stopped. The nine red heifers slaughtered during the time of Israel's Temple worship were burned outside the city of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. The Mount of Olives played a significant role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Second, Christian scholars see the red heifer as a type, or picture, of Jesus. Like the heifer, he was slaughtered outside the city. His life was given for the sake of purifying God's people from association with death. Though he was slaughtered by unholy (unclean) men, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who killed him and imposed himself to make them clean.

Verses 9-10

“A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin.

¹⁰ The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the foreigners residing among them.

- A man was to gather up the ashes of the heifer. They were to be saved in a place outside the camp to be used for making "the water of cleansing." The name literally means "the water for un sinning."

Verses 11-22

¹¹ Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days. ¹² They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then they will be clean. But if they do not purify themselves on the third and seventh days, they will not be clean. ¹³ If they fail to purify themselves after touching a human corpse, they defile the LORD's tabernacle. They must be cut off from Israel. Because the water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on them, they are unclean; their uncleanness remains on them.

¹⁴ “This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days, ¹⁵ and every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean.

¹⁶ “Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days.

¹⁷ “For the unclean person, put some ashes from the burned purification offering into a jar and pour fresh water over them. ¹⁸ Then a man who is ceremonially

clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there. He must also sprinkle anyone who has touched a human bone or a grave or anyone who has been killed or anyone who has died a natural death.¹⁹ The man who is clean is to sprinkle those who are unclean on the third and seventh days, and on the seventh day he is to purify them. Those who are being cleansed must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and that evening they will be clean.²⁰ But if those who are unclean do not purify themselves, they must be cut off from the community, because they have defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on them, and they are unclean.²¹ This is a lasting ordinance for them. "The man who sprinkles the water of cleansing must also wash his clothes, and anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening."²² Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening."

- The ordinance concerns anyone or anything which has come in contact with someone or something which is dead or has been touched by something which is dead. Death is the result of sinful behavior. There was no death until after sin had invaded the world. The New Testament teaches that the wages of sin is death. We only die because we have sinned, so death is unavoidably connected to sin. To come into contact with death or anything associated with it is to be touched by sin. (Since we are all sinners, we are all touching death every moment of every day, for to sin is to die.)
- The ashes of the red heifer were to be mixed with water and sprinkled on those who had contact with death. This water/ash mixture was known as "The Water of Cleansing" or "The Water of Unsinning." The sprinkling was to be done on the third day after contact with death (Jesus was in the tomb for three days.) and on the seventh day after contact with the dead.
- If a person who has touched death is sprinkled in the prescribed manner by the water/ash mixture, that person will be declared clean, acceptable to God and welcomed into God's house. However, if a person refuses to be sprinkled by the "Water of Unsinning," he remains unclean and not acceptable to God. Such a person cannot enter the kingdom.
- The red heifer is clearly a picture of Jesus, and this chapter declares the Gospel message. Unless you are sprinkled by the redeeming blood of Jesus, you remain unclean and cannot enter the kingdom of God. Today, Jesus is The Water of Unsinning!

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Red Heifer*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)