

Cleansing from Leprosy

The disciples of Christ meet each week to memorialise his sacrifice, in laying down his life for his friends. And at such a time, we remember how that we are cleansed from all iniquity by washing our garments in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14). So we read of his work “Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and **purify unto himself** a special people, zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:14). As it is written again:

“... Christ also loved the ecclesia, 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 ecclesia, **not having spot, nor wrinkle, or any such thing**, but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

We are naturally in an unclean state, by virtue of the sinful flesh it is our misfortune to bear, and also morally because of the sins and iniquities that we commit. But our Redeemer is able to cleanse us from both aspects, so that he may present us to himself as being cleansed, and sanctified, without spot, wrinkle, or any such thing. So the Psalmist anticipated this situation, saying: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psa. 51:7).

One of the ways by which our purifying is foreshadowed under the Mosaic Law, is in the cleansing and healing of those who had the misfortune to be leprous. For our exhortation today therefore, we shall consider the leper, and the circumstances of his cleansing, to derive lessons and principles that relate to our own cleansing of mortal sinfulness.

Leviticus chapter 13 prescribed that “the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, Unclean . All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone: without the camp shall his habitation be” (Lev. 13:45-46).

A leper then, was ostracised from society, living separate from the camp, dwelling alone, and crying out “Unclean, Unclean”. Leviticus 22:4 shows that they were excluded from eating the holy things of the sacrifice, and Numbers 5:2 also repeats the point that they were to be excluded from the camp: “Both male and female shall ye put out, without the camp shall ye put them: that they defile not their camps, in the midst thereof I dwell” (Num. 5:3). Leprosy then, was a serious defiling sickness, that rendered its victims unclean, defiled, and having to live outside of the camp of Israel – and by definition therefore, unable to participate in the Tabernacle system of worship.

Jude describes false brethren: “Likewise also, these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignitaries” (Jude 1:8). This phrase: “defile the flesh” appears to be an allusion back to the plague of leprosy, which defiled the flesh of the sufferers. Even so, false brethren defile the ecclesia – the body of Christ. So the High Priest would “look upon the plague in the skin of the flesh” and if certain conditions were found, it would be pronounced as “a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him unclean.” (Lev. 13:3). He was therefore excluded from the camp, lest the whole encampment become defiled. Even so, false brethren ought to be excluded from the ecclesias – for similar reasons.

The reference in Jude (above) also speaks of those who “despise dominion”, and this also seems to be the case with Miriam, Aaron’s sister. Both Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, “for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, Hath Yahweh indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us? And Yahweh heard it ...” (Num. 12:1-2).

Murmuring against Moses, the chosen leader, both Miriam and Aaron despised his dominion, and sought to establish their own leadership. But Miriam was smitten with leprosy as a consequence of her rebellion: "Behold, Miriam became leprous, white as snow: and Aaron looked upon Miriam, and, behold, she was leprous" (Num. 12:10).

This was the first time in Scripture where leprosy was inflicted as a punishment for sin. It has been said that this disease was like a living death – there was no known treatment or cure, and the sufferer would decline and remain defiled to the day of their death. Aaron described the situation in his entreaty to Moses: "Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb" (Num. 12:12).

Yahweh, however, was gracious to Miriam, and after 7 days, she was healed and cleansed. But this held up the whole encampment: "the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again" (Num. 12:15). How humiliating this must have been for Miriam – all the people would know that the reason why they could not continue their journey was because of her. She, with Aaron had murmured against Moses in exalting themselves, and now she was humiliated because of her sin.

KING UZZIAH

Another occasion where leprosy was inflicted as a punishment for sin, is the case of King Uzziah. This king started out being faithful, "and God helped him" in his military endeavours" (2 Chron. 26:7). "He was marvellously helped, till he was strong" (2 Chron. 26:15). But the record continues:

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction: for he transgressed against Yahweh his God, and went into the temple of Yahweh to burn incense upon the altar of incense." (vs 16).

Becoming elevated in pride, the king took upon himself the role of a priest, and sought to engage in a priestly function of offering incense, which Yahweh had not commanded (cp. Lev. 10:1). As a king, and not a priest, he had no jurisdiction over the temple worship – yet he sought to enter in, as his own High Priest. So the priests withstood him:

"... they withstood Uzziah the king, and said unto him, It appertaineth not unto thee, Uzziah, to burn incense unto Yahweh, but to the priests the sons of Aaron, that are consecrated to burn incense: go out of the sanctuary: for thou hast trespassed; neither shall it be for thine honour from Yahweh Elohim" (2 Cor. 26:18).

The High Priest, who Uzziah sought to emulate, had as part of his clothing, a plate of gold upon his forehead, upon which was written, "Holiness to Yahweh" (see Exodus 39:30). The sanctuary was to epitomise praise, and glory, and holiness to Yahweh – yet the king sought his own honour. So it was, that by contrast to the High Priest, king Uzza was smitten with leprosy in his forehead for refusing to heed the remonstrations of the priests:

"Then Uzziah was wroth, and had a censer in his hand to burn incense: and while he was wroth with the priests, the leprosy even rose up in his forehead before the priests in the house of Yahweh, from besides the incense altar ... and Uzziah the king was a leper until the day of his death, and dwelt in a several house, being a leper; for he was cut off from the house of Yahweh" (2 Chron. 26:19-21).

By contrast to Uzziah, the Lord Jesus Christ did not elevate himself to be a priest – he was specifically ordained by Yahweh. So the Apostle records the position of High Priest:

“... no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also, Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec ...” (Heb. 5:5-6).

The Lord Jesus Christ was the only one qualified to be a High Priest after the order of Aaron. This position was as a king-priest (Heb. 7:1-5) and the Messiah was anointed in both capacities. He truly demonstrated “Holiness to Yahweh”, and epitomised that holiness in all that he did.

Interesting, in the year that Uzziah died – presumably from his leprosy – Isaiah saw a vision of the glorified Christ:

“In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord sitting upon his throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple” (Isa. 6:1).

But notice that the elevation of the Lord Jesus was to the glory and holiness of Yahweh – as Isaiah also saw a symbolic depiction of the saints also in glory:

“And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, Holy, Holy is Yahweh of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3).

Here, we find Messiah sitting upon a kingly throne, in a priestly temple – and the whole situation is Holiness to Yahweh. By contrast to the leper (including Uzziah) who had to cry out “Unclean, Unclean”, the saints of Yahweh cried out, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, and gave glory to Him.

THE LEPROUS HOUSE

Leviticus chapter 14 describes how that leprosy could be in a house. Verses 37 and 39 describe how that in this case, the High Priest would inspect the house twice. If the plague remained despite remedial treatment, the entire building was pronounced to be “unclean”, and it was to be utterly destroyed:

“and he shall break down the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof, and all the mortar of the house: and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place” (Lev. 14:45).

These things have a counterpart in the ministry of Messiah. He visited and cleansed the Temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry (Jno. 2:15), and once at the end of his ministry (Mat.21:12-13). But the house remained spiritually diseased. So there was a third “visitation” (Luk. 19:44), when the house was to be broken down, with the stones thereof:

“they shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another, because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation” (Luk. 19:4, also Mat. 24:2).

Significantly, these same principles are to be followed in the case of errant brethren in the ecclesial house:

“a man that in an heretick, after the first and second admonition reject: Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself” (Tit. 3:10-11).

Notice the principles here: there is the first and second visitation/admonition, followed by rejection if there is no repentance evident. As we saw earlier, those who “defile the flesh” of the Christ-Body, whilst they should be given space to repent (cp. Rev. 2:21), should be rejected, being subverted and bringing upon themselves self-condemnation.

“IF THOU WILT”

Luke chapter 5 recounts a most interesting occasion where Messiah touched a leper, and healed him:

“and it came to pass, when he was in a certain city, behold a man **full of leprosy**: who seeing Jesus fell on his face, and besought him, saying, **Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean**. And he put forth his hand and touched him, saying, I will: be thou clean. And immediately the leprosy departed from him.” (Lu. 5:12-13)

Notice that here, Jesus touched the leper (cont. Isa. 52:11). This man, although it would seem that he was in the advanced stages of this disease (i.e. he was “full” of Leprosy), had the belief and confidence that Messiah could cure him. There was no doubt in his mind – the only question was whether or not it was Jesus’ will to do so. It was, and so he was “immediately” healed.

Following the cleansing and healing, Jesus “charged him to tell no man, but go, and shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing, according as Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them” (Lu. 5:14).

Notice that the whole point of the exercise was to provide “a testimony unto them” – that is, the priests. Ordinarily, there was no cure for leprosy – only Divine Intervention could cleanse and heal this terrible disease. Almost certainly, the priests would never have seen a man be healed from leprosy, and the fact of this man being made whole was a powerful witness to the validity of Christ’s miracles of healing. It was a sign and witness that they could not deny.

There is another reference to Messiah healing lepers, again in the Gospel record of Luke, chapter 17:

“.. there met him 10 men that were lepers, which stood afar off: and they lifted up their voices, and said, Jesus, Master, have mercy on us” (Lu. 17:12-13).

Notice that here, these lepers substituted their cry of “Unclean, Unclean” to a cry for mercy from Messiah. Indeed, they were cleansed, having obtained Divine Mercy from him. And again, the healed men were told: “Go, shew yourselves unto the priests” (Luke 17:14).

All of the healing miracles of Messiah demonstrated his ability to overcome the malady of the human condition. Leprosy was a divine parable, a living death that could not ordinarily be healed. But the Master came to provide healing where healing would otherwise be impossible. As it is written, “Himself he took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses” (Mat. 8:17). But this quote is from Isaiah chapter 53. This is a prophecy of the coming Messiah, concerning whom it was written:

“... he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken ...” (Isa. 53:8)

Here, the word for “stricken” is the same word rendered “plague” In Leviticus and elsewhere, by way of describing leprosy. Not that Christ was leprous – but that rather, he bare that which leprosy represents. He bare the uncleanness of human nature, from which he needed to be purified. The Apostle Paul spoke of the malady of his own condition:

“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord ...” (Rom. 7:24-25).

Like as leprosy was a living death that could not be cured - humanly speaking - even so Paul described the source of all his temptations and weaknesses as “the body of this death”. But he rejoiced in the knowledge that Jesus Christ our Lord has prevailed, and is able to heal us from the infirmities of the flesh. We look forward therefore, to that day when diseases such as leprosy shall be taken away, and when there shall be no sorrow or sighing. Then Holiness and Glory shall be ascribed to Yahweh, and all the earth shall be at rest.

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