

In Leviticus 10, Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire – and died,  
as fire came out from the LORD and consumed them.

In Leviticus 16, we are told that the LORD spoke to Moses  
after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD and died  
(suggesting that they may have tried to go into the Most Holy Place).

Chapters 11-15 form something of an interlude to that narrative.

These laws about the clean and the unclean

are all about how Israel can approach a holy God!

Aaron and his sons are supposed to distinguish between the holy and the common –  
and between the clean and the unclean.

Holy – is that which is devoted solely to God

Common – is that which is for man’s use

And within the “common” there is yet another distinction:

The Clean – is suitable for/moving toward the holy place

The Unclean – is unsuitable for/moving away from the holy place

And as we saw last time, there is another category as well:

The Abomination – that which is detestable – connected with idolatry and death

Tonight we look at childbirth!

## **1. Purification and Childbirth (v1-5)**

### **a. The Male Child (v1-4)**

#### **i. Unclean for Seven Days (v1-2)**

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup> “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.*

Verse 2 makes clear that the content of chapter 15 was already known.

We’ll look at chapter 15 in more detail in a couple weeks,

but I’ll need to explain the basics here –

since Moses assumes that you know it!

In chapter 15, the first eighteen verses deal with male discharges,  
while verses 19-30 deal with female discharges.

The movement in chapter 15 starts with abnormal discharges for men –  
concluding with normal sexual function.

It is worth pointing out that even normal sexual function  
rendered both man and woman unclean.

It is for this reason that God warned the Israelites in Exodus 19:15  
not to have sexual relations before they entered the worship of God.  
If you are going to come into the presence of the Most Holy God,  
then you should have nothing else on your mind,  
or on your body!  
Since that which is unclean has the power to contaminate,  
the Israelites were commanded not to be contaminated.

In the case of the woman in 15:19-30 the sequence is reversed.

First we deal with the normal, then we move to the abnormal.

Verses 19-24 speak of the normal menstrual cycle.

How can this be said to be “improper function”?

Doesn't a woman have her period every month?

Think about what is happening.

For the man, if the seed falls anywhere but his wife,  
it renders him unclean.

What is the purpose of her flow?

It signals the fact that she is not pregnant.

It means that the unfertilized egg is passing from her body.

Therefore she will be unclean for seven days,

and any man who lies with her will also be unclean seven days.

The stain of impurity is contagious.

But then in verses 25-30 we hear of abnormal discharges in women.

Like the man, this is not an ordinary uncleanness.

This one requires an eighth day sacrifice in order to be restored.

There is a closing admonition to the priests in chapter 15,

encouraging them to teach these things

–keeping the Israelites separate from that which would defile them.

(We'll come back to this in a couple of weeks – it's a great Advent text!)

But, returning to chapter 12, if the woman is rendered unclean by her menstrual flow,  
then why would childbirth render a woman unclean?

And for that matter,

why would a female child double the time of her impurity?

Many ancient peoples would quarantine menstruating, pregnant, or childbearing women.  
A woman's ability to bring life into the world is a marvelous thing!  
And yet – the frequency with which women died in childbirth is a scary thing!  
Truly, childbirth is all about life and death!

Back in Genesis 1, God told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply.  
Adam had called his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living.

And after the fall, in Genesis 3, God said that he would multiply pain in childbirth –  
but that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent!

And all of that took place in the Garden – the original sanctuary where a holy people  
met with their holy God!

Now – in Leviticus – as we are hearing about how God is preparing a *new* holy place  
where a holy people can meet with him –  
all of these images from Genesis come back!

Leviticus 11 has just told us about the clean and unclean animals,  
concluding with its absolute prohibition of touching any swarming creature,  
particularly serpents.

The seed of the serpent is at enmity with the seed of the woman.

Israel – the son of God – must realize that creation is no longer *simply good*.  
The ground has been cursed – and the serpent has been cursed!

Having spoken of the seed of the serpent in chapter 11,  
Moses now turns to the seed of the woman,  
and does so in the context of Genesis 17 –  
the covenant sign of circumcision –  
the original “eighth day.”

## **ii. Circumcision on the Eighth Day (v3)**

<sup>3</sup> *And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.*

Leviticus 8-10 has just told us about the consecration of the priests,  
who entered their holy service on the eighth day.  
Observant Israelites would notice the similarity with circumcision here in chapter 12.  
Just as the priests entered their holy service on the eighth day,  
so also every Israelite male enters the covenant on the eighth day.

We need to remember that in Exodus 19, God had said that Israel was set apart  
as a holy priesthood – a royal nation.  
The priesthood of all believers is a very Old Testament notion!

The problem was that a universal priesthood was unrealistic.  
At Mt. Sinai it was the “young men” who filled the role.  
And when the Levites are selected as the priestly tribe,  
they are explicitly connected with the “firstborn.”

So every Israelite male was consecrated to his “priesthood” on the eighth day.

Circumcision, then, must be seen as a sign of the new covenant,  
the day when the Israelite boy receives the promise of the new creation.  
The eighth day is overwhelmingly the day of atonement—  
the day when God’s people are made clean.

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant.  
It highlighted – in a very obvious way – the importance of the *seed*.  
Snipping off the flesh of the foreskin was what distinguished between the clean (Israel)  
and the unclean (Gentiles).

And only those who were clean might approach *the holy*.

Paul will refer to our baptism as “the circumcision made without hands” (Col 2) –  
as we are washed – cleansed – made clean.

The NT never says that the old law was a bad thing –  
but rather that it was given “until the time of reformation” – (Heb 9)  
until the time when *Jesus* entered into the holy of holies made without hands!

The sacraments of the NT were designed to be simpler – without blood –  
but they point to the same things!

Before Christ shed his blood – there was no water that could cleanse you!  
But the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin –  
and therefore, now we don’t need circumcision –  
we don’t need to shed our own blood  
waiting for the seed of the woman to come.

He has come – and he is risen from the dead and sits at the right hand of the Father!

He has entered the heavenly holy of holies –  
and so every eighth day, we gather to remember how he was snipped off!

But let’s come back to Leviticus!

Because the circumcised *boy* is clean,  
as the foreskin of his flesh is cut off on the 8<sup>th</sup> day

(and the cutting off of the foreskin of his flesh  
symbolizes the cutting away of the old nature—see Col. 2:8-12),

But his mother cannot be purified for another 33 days.

**iii. In the Blood of Her Purifying for Thirty-Three Days (v4)**

*<sup>4</sup> Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed.*

The Flood poured down for 40 days –

Moses was on Mt. Sinai for 40 days.

Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years.

Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days.

The common thread that runs between the various “40 day/40 year” passages,  
is the separation or isolation of the party from contact with the larger community.

There is no suggestion here that sex or childbirth is bad.

But just as in the case of the red heifer in Num 19 (that I mentioned last week),

where the priest became unclean

in the very process of making Israel clean,

the mother is hereby seen in the same light.

She becomes unclean in order that she might bring a child into the covenant.

And notice the restriction in verse 4 –

“She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary,  
until the days of her purifying are completed.”

Each woman experiences childbirth a little differently.

The actual period of time of a post-partum discharge can vary widely.

But the point here is *not* that she is unclean until her discharge clears up.

For childbirth of a male child, she is in the blood of her purifying for 40 days.

(Leviticus 15 will talk more about discharges!)

But the central focus of Leviticus is about how humanity can enter the presence of a holy God.

The holy are those things (and people) who belong entirely to God and his service.

The common refers to everything else.

And the common also comes in two categories:

the clean – which is ready and prepared for God’s service;

and the unclean – which is not ready and prepared for God’s service.

Some things are *always* unclean:

unclean animals – birds – creeping things.  
They represent creation in rebellion against God.

But some things can be clean – or unclean – depending on circumstances.  
God's purpose is to move humanity from uncleanness –  
from the estate of sin and misery –  
to an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.

In the OT, however, *nothing* is permanently clean.  
Everything can be contaminated!

Even the *holy* can become unclean.

The priests are holy – but if they touch a dead body, they become unclean.  
The sanctuary is holy – and the inner sanctuary is even called the *holy of holies* –  
the Most Holy Place!

But even the Most Holy Place can be desecrated!

And this is the problem with the Levitical code.  
It only works if the people actually do what it says!

The good news – the gospel according to Leviticus –  
is that there is now a way into the Holy Place!

The unclean animals of chapter 11 reminded us of the serpent –  
the uncleanness of childbirth now reminds us of the seed of the woman  
that will crush the head of the serpent!

## **b. The Female Child (v5)**

### **i. Unclean for Two Weeks (v5a)**

<sup>5</sup> *But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation.*

But then why is a woman unclean for twice as long for a female child?

In the case of a boy, the mother's 7 days cover herself.

Then his circumcision on the eighth day,  
cuts away his old flesh and brings him into the covenant.

For a girl, however, the mother is unclean for 14 days,  
7 for herself and 7 for her daughter.

And she must be separated from the community for 80 days,

40 days for herself, and 40 days for her daughter.

**ii. In the Blood of Her Purifying for Sixty-Six Days (v5b)**

*And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.*

If you think about it – the doubled period of time highlights the significance of the event.  
And the distinction may help address a common misunderstanding.

It is true that only males were circumcised.  
But it is *not true* that only males had a ritual for entering the Israelite community.

Females are not circumcised (mutilated would be a better term for that!) –  
but females are included in the entrance rite into the people of God,  
namely, the ritual of purification, described in verses 6-7.

**2. The Ritual of Purification (v6-8)**

**a. Burnt Offering and Sin Offering to Make Atonement (v6-7)**

<sup>6</sup> *“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, <sup>7</sup> and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female.*

Why does she need “atonement”?

Why does she need a sin offering?

It’s not because sex is inherently sinful.

It’s because – since the fall – *we* are inherently sinful!!!

Atonement is made – not for the child, but for the mother.

Mark Garcia helps us think about how this works:

God is, particularly in terms of the Leviticus-Genesis interplay, the God of creation, of holiness, of glory, of full *life*. Purity, then, and the notion of being unblemished, is a matter of fullness of life in the sense of being devoted or dedicated to life. Disqualification from the area of *sancta [the holy]* comes with any lack of the fullness of life. A disqualifying thing was thus often relegated to the wilderness, the area of non-life and of desolation (Lev. 4:11-12; 10:4-5; 13:46; 21:1-4).

Remember that the point is not simply physiological.

She is banned from the sanctuary for 40 days (for a son) and 80 days (for a daughter).

She may be feeling just fine – with nary a show of blood anywhere –

Sorry, dear, it's only day 37 – you still have to wait three more days!

The key is that in verse 7, she is cleansed from the “flow” of her blood.

The term translated “flow” is a spring – or a fountain –  
a source of naturally flowing water.

The LORD is said to be a “fountain of living water” in Jeremiah 17.

It is often used metaphorically – “fountain of life” “fountain of wisdom” “fountain of tears”

But here in Leviticus it refers to the “fountain” of blood –

indeed, later, in Leviticus 20,

Moses will say that a man who lies with a woman during her menstrual period

“uncovers the fountain of her blood” –

and both shall be cut off from Israel. (Lev. 20:18)

The idea of a womb as a wellspring – a fountain –

was very familiar in the Ancient Near East.

As Mark Garcia puts it:

“the overflowing, dysfunctional womb-wellspring  
was associated with the disorder of the wilderness...  
while the properly functioning womb-wellspring  
was associated with the life-giving center.”

Just as a farmer plows and plants his seed in a field –

so a male plows and plants his seed in the womb.

The biblical image of the womb as fountain may be less familiar –

but it is no less prominent in scripture!

The only way that salvation will ever come to the human race

is through the womb of a woman.

If her fountain were to flow unceasingly –

then she would never give birth –

and humanity would die out!

If you think about it,

in Genesis 1, we are told that “in the beginning” darkness was over the deep –

and the “deep” refers to the chaotic waters – “without form and void” –

certainly nothing like a “sanctuary” fit for God to meet with man!

And then – in seven days – the Word and Spirit of God brought forth creation –

bounding and ordering the waters –



until – in Genesis 2 – God plants a garden in Eden.

Then, at the Flood the *fountains* of the deep burst forth –  
and the chaotic waters prevailed over everything in forty days –  
and after 40 days, the fountains are closed.!

Why is a woman said to remain in the blood of her purifying for 40 days?  
Because if every womb continues to flow –  
then this flood will destroy humanity!

Every time a woman bears a son – we see a picture of creation – un-creation – and re-creation!  
Redemptive history is recapitulated in daily life!

We shouldn't be surprised by this.  
Scripture does this all the time!

Proverbs 5 uses this imagery powerfully:  
“Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well.  
Should your springs be scattered abroad, streams of water in the streets?  
Let them be for yourself alone, and not for strangers with you.  
Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth,  
a lovely deer, a graceful doe.  
Let her breasts fill you at all times with delight;  
be intoxicated always in her love.  
Why should you be intoxicated, my son, with a forbidden woman  
and embrace the bosom of an adulteress?” (5:15-20)

The themes of adultery and idolatry are connected regularly throughout the scriptures –  
so we should not at all be surprised to see proper sexual relations  
used to illustrate God's relation with his people!

Which means that the female body has a particular relationship to the *holy*.  
It's fitting that we are approaching Advent!

#### **b. Provision for the Poor (v8)**

<sup>8</sup> *And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, <sup>[a]</sup> one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”*

So at the end of that time of purification,  
she must bring a year-old lamb for a burnt offering,  
and a young pigeon or dove for a sin offering (or two birds, if she is poor).  
And after the priest makes atonement for her, she will be clean.

There is some question as to how faithful Israel was in keeping this law.

It is possible that Elkanah and Hannah kept it (1 Samuel 1:21),  
but it appears likely that most women living away from the central sanctuary  
usually did not make a special trip just for this.

This makes Joseph and Mary rather unique in scripture.

Indeed, Luke 2 is highlighting the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary,  
as they come to the temple to dedicate the baby Jesus.

This is a remarkable event, if you think about it.

Bearing Jesus—the eternal Son of God—rendered Mary unclean!

She had to bring a blood sacrifice to purify herself from that impurity!

This makes it clear that the impurity of childbirth  
has nothing to do with any supposed sinfulness of sex

(since Mary was a virgin!),

nor does it imply anything sinful about the child (since Jesus was perfect).

Rather, it shows us the true humanity of Jesus.

It shows us that he was indeed, born of a woman, born under the law.

She took the uncleanness of childbirth upon herself,

so that, in the words of the hymn-writer, “to show God’s love aright,  
she bore the world a Savior.”

Leviticus 12, then, is preparing us for understanding

how the eternal Son of God could be born of a woman;

because it is not the child, but the mother, who is rendered unclean by childbirth.

What do we do with this today?

We don’t consider mothers to be “unclean”

or unfit to enter the worship of God for 40 or 80 days after childbirth.

We don’t consider sexual relations between husband and wife to make us unclean.

Why not?

So what is the point for women today?

You are no longer anticipating the fulfillment of the promise to Eve.

There are two NT answers—one of continuity and the other of discontinuity.

The answer of continuity is found in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 (read).

<sup>11</sup> *Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness.* <sup>12</sup> *I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.* <sup>13</sup> *For Adam was formed first, then Eve;* <sup>14</sup> *and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.*

<sup>15</sup> *Yet she will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.*

This provides a continuity all the way back to creation and fall.

She (singular) will be saved through childbearing,  
(or perhaps it should be translated “through *the* childbearing”)  
if they (plural) continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

Why does Paul switch from the singular to the plural?

Because the specific promise of the seed of the woman has been fulfilled,  
so that there is only an analogical continuity:  
sure, women still bring forth covenant children,  
taking upon themselves the danger and peril of childbirth,  
facing death, so that they might bear new life.

As such there is certainly a Christ-likeness to childbirth,  
and the pains of childbirth, for the Christian woman,  
are truly a sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

But there is also an element of discontinuity with the OT purification laws.

That’s why Paul uses the singular – *she* will be saved through childbearing  
if *they* continue in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

Not every woman needs to bear children!

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 7 praises singleness as a Christian calling,  
and also calls Christians to regular marital relations without any hint of impurity.  
Likewise, Galatians 3:27-29 declares that male and female are now one in Christ,  
in a way that they were not before.

As the early fathers put it,  
by passing through all stages of life, Christ Jesus sanctified all stages of life.

As he passed through the womb, he rendered it clean.

No longer would a woman’s menstrual flow be considered unclean,  
because Jesus has cleansed it.

As Jesus has broken down the wall between Jew and Gentile,  
symbolized in the food laws,  
so also has he broken down the wall between male and female,  
symbolized here in chapter 12.

Boys and girls are baptized together.

Men and women partake equally of the Lord’s Supper.

Singleness is now a blessing,  
and eunuchs are welcomed into the Kingdom of God,  
because the Seed has come.