

Leviticus 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 13. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, When the priest has examined him, he shall pronounce him unclean. But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days. And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day. And if in his eyes the disease is checked, and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up for another seven days. And the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day. And if the diseased area has faded, and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean. It is only an eruption, and he shall wash his clothes and be clean. But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. And the priest shall look, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a leprous disease. When a man is afflicted with a leprous disease, he shall be brought to the priest, and the priest shall look. And if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is raw flesh in the swelling, it is a chronic leprous disease in the skin of his body.

And the priest shall pronounce him unclean. He shall not shut him up, for he is unclean. And if the leprous disease breaks out in the skin, so that the leprous disease covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, then the priest shall look. And if the leprous disease has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease. It has all turned white, and he is clean. But when raw flesh appears on him, he shall be unclean. And the priest shall examine the raw flesh and pronounce him unclean. Raw flesh is unclean, for it is a leprous disease.

But if the raw flesh recovers and turns white again, then he shall come to the priest. And the priest shall examine him. And if the disease has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce the diseased person clean. He is clean. If there is in the skin of one's body a boil and it heals, and in the place of the boil there comes a white swelling or a reddish white spot, then it shall be shown to the priest. And the priest shall look. And if it appears deeper than the skin, and its hair has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a case of leprous disease that has broken out in the boil. But if the priest examines it, and there is no white hair in it, and it is not deeper than the skin, but has faded, then the priest shall shut him up seven days. And if it spreads in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a disease.

But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread, it is the scar of the boil, and the priest shall pronounce him clean. Or when the body has a burn on its skin, and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a spot, reddish white or white, the priest shall examine it. And if the hair in the spot has turned white, and it appears deeper than the skin, then it is a leprous disease. It has broken out in the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a case of leprous disease. But if the priest examines it, and there is no white hair in the spot, and it is no deeper than the skin, but has faded, the priest shall shut him up seven days. And the priest shall examine him the seventh day. If it is spreading in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is a case of leprous disease. But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread in the skin, but has faded, it is a swelling from the burn. And the priest shall pronounce him clean, for it is the scar of the burn.

When a man or woman has a disease on the head or the beard, the priest shall examine the disease. And if it appears deeper than the skin, and the hair in it is yellow and thin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean. It is an itch, a leprous disease of the head or the beard. And if the priest examines the itching disease, and it appears no deeper than the skin, and there is no black hair in it, then the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for seven days. And on the seventh day, the priest shall examine the disease. If the itch has not spread, and there is in it no yellow hair, and the itch appears to be no deeper than the skin, then he shall shave himself, but the itch he shall not shave. And the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for another seven days. And on the seventh day, the priest shall examine the itch. And if the itch has not spread in the skin, and it appears to be no deeper than the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean, and he shall wash his clothes and be clean. But if the itch spreads in the skin after his cleansing, then the priest shall examine him. And if the itch has spread in the skin, the priest need not seek for the yellow hair, he is unclean. But if in his eyes the itch is unchanged and black hair has grown in it, the itch is healed, and he is clean, and the priest shall pronounce him clean. When a man or woman has spots on the skin of the body, white spots, the priest shall look. And if the spots on the skin of the body are of a dull white, it is leukoderma that has broken out in the skin, he is clean. If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald, he is clean. And if a man's hair falls out from his forehead, he has baldness of the forehead, he is clean. But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased area, it is a leprous disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. Then the priest shall examine him. And if the disease swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, like the appearance of leprous disease in the skin of the body, he is a leprous man. He is unclean. The priest must pronounce him unclean. His disease is on his head.

[6 : 11] The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, unclean, unclean. He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp. When there is a case of leprous disease in a garment, whether a woollen or a linen garment, in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, if the disease is greenish or reddish in the garment, or in the skin or in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, it is a case of leprous disease, and it shall be shown to the priest. And the priest shall examine the disease and shut up that which has the disease for seven days.

Then he shall examine the disease on the seventh day, if the disease has spread in the garment, in the warp or the woof or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, the disease is a persistent leprous disease. It is unclean. And he shall burn the garment, or the warp or the woof, the wool or the linen, or any item made of skin that is diseased, for it is a persistent leprous disease. It shall be burned in the fire. And if the priest examines, and if the disease has not spread in the garment, in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, then the priest shall command that they wash the thing in which is the disease, and he shall shut it up for another seven days. And the priest shall examine the diseased thing after it has been washed. And if the appearance of the diseased area has not changed, though the disease has not spread, it is unclean, you shall burn it in the fire, whether the rot is on the back or on the front. But if the priest examines, and if the diseased area has faded after it has been washed, he shall tear it out of the garment, or the skin, or the warp or the woof. Then if it appears again in the garment, in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, it is spreading. You shall burn with fire whatever has the disease. But the garment, or the warp or the woof, or any article made of skin from which the disease departs when you have washed it, shall then be washed a second time, and be clean. This is the law for a case of leprous disease, in a garment of wool or linen, either in the warp or the woof, or in any article made of skin, to determine whether it is clean or unclean. Leviticus chapters 13 and 14 are two lengthy chapters dealing with diseases of the skin that would render the sufferer unclean, and could lead to people being excluded from the holy community. Commonly translated as leprosy, this is not the same thing as we would typically refer to under the name of leprosy. Modern leprosy is Hansen's disease, yet the description of the symptoms given in this chapter and the chapter that follow do not fit that disease. It seems probable that we have a variety of associated skin conditions here, rather than just one single disease. This leprosy could also strike houses and clothing, not merely human flesh. There are also some notable features about the way that it is handled that should draw our attention, and give us a sense of what we are and are not referring to here. One such detail in particular is the fact that someone who is completely white on account of this disease was considered clean. We should also consider the context of these laws. As we have already seen, the laws of these chapters follow the pattern of the judgments declared upon the serpent, the woman, and the man in Genesis chapter 3 after the fall. The judgment upon the serpent connects with the clean and unclean animals. The judgment upon the woman connects with the laws concerning childbirth, and here the judgments upon the man connect with laws concerning corrupt flesh. The laws of leprosy, like the laws that follow concerning bodily discharges, have to do with the exposure of the flesh. In considering the laws concerning childbirth, we saw something similar at play there. The laws of this chapter, as in chapter 11, are addressed by the Lord to Moses and Aaron. After Aaron has been ordained as the high priest, he is included alongside Moses as the recipient of much of the revelation of the book of Leviticus.

Verses 2-8 of the chapter deal with the symptoms of a leprous disease. It was the duty of Aaron and the priest to examine cases of suspected leprosy. In some cases, the disease was quite evident. The hair in the area would have turned white, and something was clearly wrong beneath the surface. However, in other cases, things were not quite so clear.

The priest would examine and then quarantine the person for seven days, waiting to see whether the disease spread, whether an eruption seemingly on the surface of the skin would actually reach deeper and spread further. If in a further examination after the quarantine of seven days, the condition did not seem to have spread or worsened, the person would be quarantined for seven more days, examined again, and then if it hadn't spread by that point, he was considered clean.

The person could then wash their clothes and enter fully back into life among the people. If the examination was not satisfactory, however, the person would be pronounced unclean with a leprous disease. The rest of the chapter provides the principles of examination in a number of different sorts of cases that might be presented. In verses 9-17, there is a particular emphasis upon the presence of raw flesh. If the leprous disease has covered the entire body of the infected person, and he is entirely white, then he is considered clean. Perhaps the whiteness is what is left when the disease has run its course, and the raw flesh is the sign that it is still ongoing.

[11 : 37] In verses 18-46, we have a series of potential complications of other conditions. John Kleining identifies five secondary symptoms confirming the presence of a leprous skin disease.

First, change of skin colour from the normal pink-white. Second, change of hair colour from dark to white or yellow. Third, subsidence to the flesh under the infected area. Fourth, spread of the infected area. And fifth, ulceration of the skin in a discoloured area. From verse 47, we have a list of other potential cases of leprosy. Leprosy in garments, fabrics, and things made of skin.

Presumably, these are cases of a sort of corrupting mould. Leprosy seems to involve something of a dying off of flesh in a living person. The leper might perhaps be compared to a living corpse.

The language used of leprosy in verse 2 is of a plague or a stroke of the Lord. This is the same language that is used of the killing of the firstborn in Exodus chapter 11 verse 1. The corpse-like quality of the person afflicted with leprosy is something to which we are alerted in Numbers chapter 12 verses 8-12. After Miriam spoke out against Moses there, she was struck with leprosy. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. And Aaron said to Moses, O my Lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb.

[13 : 24] There are a few things further to observe here, beyond the comparison of the person afflicted with leprosy and the corpse. As Rabbi David Foreman notes, the corpse being referred to in Numbers chapter 12 is the corpse of the stillborn infant in particular. Leprosy here is also something that the Lord strikes people with. It seems to be a powerful exposure of the corruption of the flesh.

And in addition to rendering the body of the person afflicted with it akin to a dead corpse, it also results in a sort of social death, as they are cut off from others and must declare themselves to be unclean. In Deuteronomy chapter 24 verses 8 to 9 we read, Take care in a case of leprous disease, to be very careful to do according to all that the Levitical priest shall direct you. As I commanded them, so you shall be careful to do. Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the way as you came out of Egypt. The second part of this instruction seems to fit oddly with the first. While the Lord certainly struck Miriam with leprosy, there's nothing obviously about the fact that the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy that teaches the people to do what the Levitical priests direct them to do. Another odd feature of that particular text is that it seems to be part of the section dealing with bearing false witness against one's neighbour. How do we make sense of all of this? It seems to me that considering the occasion for the judgment of Miriam will help us to find the answer. Miriam is judged because she spoke against Moses. One can imagine the people, dealing with the onerous demands of the quarantine for suspected cases of leprosy, would be tempted to speak against the Levitical priests, much as

Miriam had spoken against Moses. However, just as the Lord struck Miriam on account of her slander of Moses, so the people should beware of slandering the leaders that the Lord had appointed to this particular task. An important feature of the Biblical text concerning leprosy, something that we might have been clued into by the way that it's introduced as a plague or a stroke, is the way that it is frequently described as something that the Lord brings upon people as a judgment for their trespasses. The person who trespasses on holy things has the corruption of their flesh break out and be revealed. One of the signs that the Lord gave to Moses for the people in Exodus chapter 4 was leprosy on his skin as he placed his hand next to his heart. When he placed it in and took it out again, it was restored like his other flesh. This might be seen as a sign of purification more generally for a sinful people. In 2 Kings chapter 5, Gehazi, the servant of Elisha, was struck with leprosy for his sin concerning Naaman, taking treasures from Naaman and lying about them to Elisha. Another example of someone being struck with leprosy is in 2 Chronicles chapter 26 verses 16 to 20 concerning King Uzziah.

But when he was strong, he grew proud to his destruction, for he was unfaithful to the Lord his God, and entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense. But Azariah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of the Lord who were men of valour, and they withstood King Uzziah and said to him, It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honour from the Lord God. Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord by the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead. And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the Lord had struck him.

Leprosy, then, seems to be connected with the stroke of the Lord in judgment upon someone. It is often connected to a signal judgment of the Lord, but it is an apt manifestation of judgment, because leprosy more generally represents the corruption and death of the flesh. The death of the flesh spiritually is reflected physically. Like the rest of the surrounding commandments, the laws here for leprosy concern the character of the flesh as a result of sin and the fall.

[17 : 29] Flesh is a bearer of death, and when the flesh is exposed, whether in its fountain infertility, in its corruption through skin disease, or through emissions of the flesh, in chapter 15, it ends up cutting the person off from the presence of the Lord.

A question to consider, what can we learn from the cases in the New Testament where Jesus deals with lepers? A question to consider, what can we learn from the people who are