

The Test of Jealousy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 February 2019

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Welcome back. Today's question is, how should we interpret the water of bitterness in the ordeal for adultery in Numbers chapter 5? Is this some sort of miracle on demand? If not, how much of an idea can we get regarding what is going on?

Certainly an interesting question, and it's a weird passage in many ways. If you look through that passage, there are a number of questions that might arise. What exactly is this water of bitterness? What exactly is going on there? Why have this weird rite at all?

If we look through scripture, I think what we will see is that this rite has typological significance. It's not just about that specific case when it arises within legal situations. It's also about the symbolic meaning of what's taking place.

So if we look in the story of Israel after the failure with the golden calf, there is the breaking of the tablets of stone and the words of the curse, as it were, and then the grinding up of the golden calf and placing it upon the waters.

And then they have to drink those waters, and many of them die as a result of that, as a judgment. Now that is an adultery test. In the same way, when we're talking about the New Testament, we can think about the way that Christ had to drink the bitter cup.

[1 : 1 6] The bitter cup there, and talking about the handwriting of requirements that was against us, this curse that hung over us as an adulterous people, I think that that is part of what's in mind in the reference to the cup in Gethsemane, but then also to the handwriting of requirements in the book of Colossians chapter 2, I think it is.

And so getting these connections suggests that there's more going on there. In the same way, we are tested as the church when we drink the cup of blessing. Now that difference between the cup of curse and the cup of blessing is significant.

There's an illocutionary or an intended purpose for our drinking of the wine in the supper, which is different from the judgment of jealousy.

So that judgment of jealousy occurred alongside the memorial offering of the bread, but here we have the memorial offering of bread, and we have the drinking of wine, but that drinking of wine is supposed to be for blessing.

There are cases in which it turns out to be for curse, but that is not its intended purpose or its presumed result. In the New Covenant, it is presumed that we will enter into blessing as we drink the cup as the bride of Christ.

[2 : 3 1] But there are cases where people who are judged because they are not partaking in a worthy manner are condemned on that account. And that case is similar to the test of jealousy.

Now, getting back to Numbers 5, when we've seen this typological background, it suggests that there's a bit more going on here than immediately meets the eye, that there's something about this case that is interesting.

Again, we could maybe connect it with Christ and the woman caught in adultery, writing on the ground, the dust of the floor, and then the writing of the law, and then finally acquitting her, and she's suspected of adultery.

That's a similar sort of case. It's worth thinking about why particularly have something like this for jealousy. First of all, when we think about jealousy, jealousy is an incredibly destructive force.

It's a force that can tear apart families, it can lead to violence and vendettas, it can lead to all sorts of problems in society. And the law, more generally, is underwritten by God's judgment.

[3 : 34] So, if they do not obey the law in the long term, they will be cast out of the land. The land will come out against them. In the same way, there is a promise of judgment upon the person who disobeys the law and is not caught.

So, God's judgment underwrites the larger legal system. It's not just about human enforcement. What we see in the case of Numbers 5 is a very explicit case of how this would play out.

And what happens is, this is not a normal ordeal test. When we think about typical ordeal tests, we think about someone having to carry, for instance, a piece of iron in their hand that's been heated up and see if their hand blisters or whatever like.

That sort of case. Where there is harm that will naturally be caused by this object. And there is appeal for God to intervene, but to intervene to prevent something that would naturally cause harm.

In the same way, testing people whether they're witches or not. If we think about Monty Python, for instance. That sort of trial is what many people think about when they think about the test of jealousy in Numbers 5.

[4 : 45] Or we might think about a more modern equivalent. When you get to a talk show, if you think about, I don't know, Jerry Springer or Jeremy Kyle or something like that.

A paternity test. That people are testing whether someone is truly the father. And in the same way, has this woman committed adultery? This is going to be either the paternity test or the polygraph test.

It's designed to test whether that person is telling the truth. And God is the great Jeremy Kyle in the sky that's going to work out whether this person is truly the father or is truly telling the truth.

It's not quite like that. What we see in this passage is something rather different. First of all, drinking the cup of judgment is not of itself going to cause the results that are spoken of as the judgment.

There's no natural relationship between drinking of that cup and having those physical consequences. Rather, that requires a divine intervention. And that is significant.

[5 : 50] So there is a sort of miracle involved here. I don't think it's a miracle on demand. There is a request, as it were, for God to intervene in a situation that has broken down and where something is needed to set things right.

Where we need to find the answer because it's tearing families apart. It's tearing a marriage apart. It's leading to... It's placing the woman at risk of violence, etc. Worth considering the way that this right protects women from violence.

The wife from violence. It's not a gender equal sort of right. It's particularly for the husband who has jealous feelings about his wife and suspicions.

And so what he does in that case is not enact his own justice and vengeance upon his wife, but puts his wife in God's hands. And so God is the one that protects at that point.

God protects from the judgment of the husband's anger and his jealousy that might otherwise lead to very serious consequences for the woman.

- [6 : 59] And so if nothing happens to the woman, then nothing is to be done. And that is a very significant way of arresting the movement of jealousy, which once aroused is a very difficult thing to quiet.
- If we look in tests of ordeal more generally, tests of ordeal really work quite well in many cases. They work quite well for a number of reasons.
- They worked because they were... The power of the law is not just in its capacity to carry out a sentence. It's also in its deterrent qualities. So first of all, there's that deterrent aspect.
- It was very effective at that. It was also something that led to people to confess and other things like that. They wouldn't want to undergo the more difficult ordeal test.
- And then finally, a lot of the times, they would be manipulated by priests and other characters to ensure that the result came out. Now, this is not an ordeal test.
- [8 : 05] In the same way, this is a test of jealousy, but not an ordeal in and of itself that would have natural consequences of... of natural consequences in these effects.
- It talks about blotting out these words that are blotted out. Now, the dust from the tabernacle floor and the words that are scraped off, there are two aspects to this.
- There's the divine words or the words of judgment, the curse, and then there's this, the dust of the land, you know, temple floor, which is the sort of paradigmatic land that will testify.
- So there are two witnesses, and these go in the water which are ingested. In the same way, Israel is tested by the word of God, the law that's given from above, and also the land that will spit them out if they're unfaithful.
- And so we see those two aspects to this. God calling two witnesses taken into the woman, and then God judges on the basis of those two witnesses.
- [9 : 10] And the memorial offering that's taken in the hand of the woman is a means of calling to God's mind that woman's action. It's part of the ordination rite for certain positions, like for the priest, that hands are filled, and as part of the ordination rite, it brings that person to God's mind, their actions and things like that, and calls for God to judge or to bless.
- What we're seeing then, I think, is a rite that does involve some sort of divine intervention. It's a divine intervention that prevents jealousy from taking matters into its own hands.
- It declares that this is God's position to judge, that man is not in the position to judge. Now, it's interesting that when we see Christ judging the woman caught in adultery, effectively what he does is he removes what they were attempting to do, which was the attempt to, say, stone her, and he places each one of the people who would want to do that as illegitimate witnesses, as illegitimate accusers.
- None of them is equipped to take up the stone and cast it as the first stone, because the person who takes up the first stone is the witness, the person who takes a self-maledictory commitment upon themselves, that if I have unfaithfully judged this person, and if I am leading the stoning of them in a way that is unjust, then I am subject to the same judgment.
- And so they all draw back at that point. Now, what Christ does is he writes on the ground, and this is the dust of the ground, and then presumably we're supposed to connect it with the handwriting that occurs with the judgment.
- [10 : 55] There is an action here that plays out the ritual of jealousy, which is what happens when there isn't a witness, when there isn't a clear situation, and it puts it in God's hand.
- And Christ then himself declares judgment, that he is not going to condemn her, that she should go her way and sin no more, that there is a judgment being declared here by God through a sort of test of jealousy.

So I think it helps us to understand part of what's taking place here. A very specific example of the test of jealousy that we're seeing is in that case, where it prevents a certain form of almost mob justice, a lynch mob almost, from taking effect, and God intervenes, and God judges, and protects the person who's being judged unfairly.

So it's a very significant case in that respect. It shows the more general commitment of God to underwrite the system of the law, that ultimately God will be the one that judges.

And there are times when we must put things into God's hand, that we are not in the position to cast final judgment. And so we must hand things over to God and say, God, you judge.

[12 : 10] And I think this is one of the things the church is supposed to do on many occasions. We put things in God's hand. We call for God to judge and to take action. We petition God to act in a way against secret sins.

We call for God to act in a way that brings to light the hidden secrets of the heart. And there is also a calling upon God to protect people who would otherwise be judged unfairly.

And so it's a recognition of the limits of human law, the calling of God for faithful justice, and the fact that ultimately, God is the one who underwrites law, not a human ability to maintain absolute justice.

This is a real concern in our society, where often we see the lack of justice, people who can't be brought to justice. And we want absolute justice, but we can't achieve that in a just way.

What do we do in that sort of case? And in that sort of case, I think this gives us some sort of way of thinking about what should take place, that we petition for God to act.

[13 : 13] We call for God to bring people to mind, their actions, and call him to judge in their case. And in that respect, we put things outside of our jurisdiction.

We recognise we are not in a position to act, but yet that God can, and we want God to act in these situations, to bring justice to bear. The other things that we should notice concerning this is that there is a lot of connection with other events in redemptive history that show that this is not just an odd right within the book of Numbers.

It's a broader paradigm that helps us to think about God's relationship with his people. There are tests of jealousy elsewhere in scripture. Two witnesses, the law and the earth, or the land, and then God's judgment and the testing through drinking the cup.

Christ's bearing of that judgment himself is significant, but then also the judgment upon Israel after the event with the golden calf. So as we look at this passage, I think we are seeing something that helps us to understand deeper biblical themes, that helps us think about judgment more effectively, and helps us realize that we are ultimately not in the position of the absolute judge, that we must put things in God's hand.

And calling for God to act here is not the same as calling God to prevent a great harm, that this act of drinking the cup is not going to lead to the harm that happens at the judgment.

[14 : 43] Rather, it's a calling of God to act, to bring that harm, if in fact that person has been unfaithful. And it's also significant that the person takes a self-maledictory oath upon themselves, that they call for God to act themselves.

So they are petitioning for God to act. They are petitioning for God to vindicate them, or for God to judge them. It's a very serious thing to do. When we talk about these things in the New Covenant, we need to recognize that there is a sense in which, when we participate in the Lord's Supper, we are calling for God to judge.

There's a memorial offering dynamic to that. We're calling, presenting ourselves to God as priests and as the bride. We're holding these things in our hands and we're saying, God, act in our case.

Bring us to mind. Bring us to mind and judge. Now, the judgment is presumed to bring blessing when we come faithfully. But if we come bearing sin, if we come as unfaithful recipients, then we are calling for God to act against us, to judge us.

And for that test of jealousy, and God being the jealous husband, he is a jealous God, as we see again and again throughout the Old Testament. God is a jealous God and he will not lightly pass over the sins of his people, the adulteries of his people.

[16 : 11] There's a sense in which we must take delight in God's word. And as we approach him and we're not doing that, as we're rebelling against him, there's a real problem. If we look in the scripture more generally, there is this husband-wife relationship between God and his people.

And when God gives us his law, for instance, the calling is not just hear this and obey it. The calling is to meditate upon it, to delight in it, to feed on it, that this is something that has been given to us to take delight and pleasure in.

This is supposed to be our food and our drink. This is the most important thing to us. And when we become people who are unfaithful, when we become people who have our hearts turned away from God, when we turn to other gods, when we turn to other things and reject God, then there is this test of jealousy.

And every week, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, there is this playing out of these themes. And we need to recognise the background for this in the Old Testament. Partly how the curse has been shifted to a theme of blessing, but then also how we still are tested before God as we call God to judge and to bring us to mind.

These are important themes. If you have any further questions about this, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. I'll leave the link to my article on this chapter below, which has a lot more thoughts on this.

[17 : 40] You might find it helpful in dealing with some of the more fine details of the chapter. And if you would like to support this and other videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or PayPal accounts.

And as I mentioned on my blog recently, I'm trying to get transcriptions for every single one of my videos in the future. If you would like to help make this possible, please consider subscribing or supporting me using my Patreon account because this is really the only way it would be possible.

It takes a lot of time and so I'll need to employ someone to do it. Thank you very much for listening and Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. God bless.