

Leviticus 15: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 15. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean. And this is the law of his uncleanness for a discharge.

Whether his body runs with his discharge, or his body is blocked up by his discharge, it is his uncleanness. Every bed on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean, and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. And anyone who touches his bed shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And whoever sits on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And whoever touches the body of the one with the discharge shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And if the one with the discharge spits on someone who is clean, then he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. And any saddle on which the one with the discharge rides shall be unclean. And whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean until the evening. And whoever carries such things shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. Anyone whom the one with the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening, and an earthenware vessel that the one with the discharge touches shall be broken, and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water. And when the one with the discharge is cleansed of his discharge, then he shall count for himself seven days for his cleansing, and wash his clothes. And he shall bathe his body in fresh water, and shall be clean. And on the eighth day he shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, and come before the Lord to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and give them to the priest. And the priest shall use them, one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord for his discharge. If a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water, and be unclean until the evening. And every garment and every skin on which the semen comes shall be washed with water, and be unclean until the evening. If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water, and be unclean until the evening. When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days. And whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. And everything on which she lies during her menstrual impurity shall be unclean. Everything also on which she sits shall be unclean. And whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. And whoever touches anything on which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. Whether it is the bed or anything on which she sits, when he touches it, he shall be unclean until the evening. And if any man lies with her and her menstrual impurity comes upon him, he shall be unclean seven days, and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean. If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her menstrual impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness, as in the days of her impurity she shall be unclean. Every bed on which she lies, all the days of her discharge, shall be to her as the bed of her impurity, and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her menstrual impurity. And whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and be unclean until the evening. But if she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count for herself seven days, and after that she shall be clean.

And on the eighth day she shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, and bring them to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall use one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her before the Lord for her unclean

discharge. Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst. This is the law for him who has a discharge, and for him who has an omission of semen, becoming unclean thereby. Also for her who is unwell with her menstrual impurity, that is for anyone, male or female, who has a discharge, and for the man who lies with a woman who is unclean.

Leviticus chapter 15 comes in a sequence of passages concerning the corruption of the flesh, passages which largely follow the order of the judgments in Genesis chapter 3 after the fall. There was a fall in the new garden of the tabernacle with the sin of Nadab and Abihu. The chapters that follow that address the reality of uncleanness in the world. The uncleanness of unclean animals and animal corpses, related to the uncleanness of the serpent, who crawls on his belly and eats dust. The uncleanness of the fleshly fountain of humanity in childbirth is discussed in chapter 12. The uncleanness of the flesh manifested in the skin condition of leprosy, with its symptoms that are reminiscent of a dead body, is addressed in chapters 13 and 14, and chapter 15 concerns the reality of bodily emissions and their uncleanness. As such emissions come from the flesh, the corruption of fallen flesh is especially exposed in them, and they must be dealt with accordingly. [5 : 21] Leviticus chapter 15 is structured chiastically, as a book-ended structure, or a there-and-back-again structure. It deals with abnormal or chronic discharges at each extremity, in verses 2-15 and 25-30, with ordinary and short-term discharges within, verses 16-17 and 19-24, and the case of emissions in ordinary sexual relations in the centre, in verse 18. As Mark Garcia writes, the first and final sections of the chapter describe physiological settings that are pathological.

The reproductive system is unsound. Neither discharge can lead to the creation of life. The two sections that flank the centre of the passage are, in Garcia's words, addressing situations that are not pathological, not life-threatening or degenerative, nor physiologically abnormal. But, while typical, they are not the ideal conditions for reproduction. Verse 18 of the chapter, he argues, represents the fulcrum of the chapter, and it portrays sexual reproductive physiology in its fully functional setting. Each individual in the scene evidences the physiology appropriate for the ideal sexual physiological setting for intercourse, and more specifically, reproduction, ejaculation of seed by the male, and the absence of menstrual discharge in the female.

The chiastic structure of the passage, with cases of the most severe impurity at each end, cases of lesser impurity within, and the case of the least impurity of all the cases discussed at the centre, presents us with a sort of concentric textual structure of impurity, but still presses the question upon us of why ordinary sexual relations are causes of uncleanness at all.

Many of the cases discussed in this chapter are cases where the reproductive system is somehow awry, the fountains of life are overflowing, but no life is being brought forth, even in the more physiologically ordinary situations of the emission of semen or menstruation, this is still the case. We should also observe the symmetry of the passage. It deals with abnormal and normal male genital discharges on one side, normal and abnormal female genital discharges on the other, and with sexual relations between the two sexes at the centre. While the male organ can serve in giving rise to new life, in both pathological and ordinary conditions, it also brings forth defiling substances and waste.

[7 : 38] The same is true of women's bodies. Even in their most ideal operations in procreative sexual acts, the fact that human bodies are corrupt flesh is still emphasised. The life that we perpetuate through procreation is a life that has been corrupted by sin and death. Our genitals, while remarkable organs of procreation, are also unruly, unclean, and after the fall subject to a sense of shame. There is a sort of ambivalence here that should be instructive for our theologies of sexuality.

While contemporary Christians are often concerned to emphasise the goodness of sexuality, and there are healthy theological instincts at work there, it is important not to lose sight of the ambivalence of sexuality, and of the reality of the flesh at the heart of it all. The Christian tradition, however, has often given a lot more weight to this ambivalence, recognising the way that the unruly, corrupt, and sinful flesh is present at the heart of the garden of sexuality. Yes, sexual relations are good, but within them we are especially exposed to the reality of flesh, not only in its potency and creational goodness, but also in its weakness, corruption, and fallenness. The laws of Leviticus chapter 15 would have forced the Israelites, both male and female, to reckon with this reality in their lives. On a regular basis, they would have to deal with uncleanness on account of discharges,

