

NUMBERS

Chapter 19

The Water of Cleansing

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: ² “This is a requirement of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke. ³ Give it to Eleazar the priest; it is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. ⁴ Then Eleazar the priest is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting. ⁵ While he watches, the heifer is to be burned—its hide, flesh, blood and offal. ⁶ The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. ⁷ After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. ⁸ The man who burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening. ⁹ “A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp. They shall be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin. ¹⁰ The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the aliens living among them. ¹¹ “Whoever touches the dead body of anyone will be unclean for seven days. ¹² He must purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third and seventh days, he will not be clean. ¹³ Whoever touches the dead body of anyone and fails to purify himself defiles the LORD’s tabernacle. That person must be cut off from Israel. Because the water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean; his uncleanness remains on him. ¹⁴ “This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent: Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days, ¹⁵ and every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean. ¹⁶ “Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days. ¹⁷ “For the unclean person, put some ashes from the burned purification offering into a jar and pour fresh water over them. ¹⁸ Then a man who is ceremonially clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there. He must also sprinkle anyone who has touched a human bone or a grave or someone who has been killed or someone who has died a natural death. ¹⁹ The man who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person on the third and seventh days, and on the seventh day he is to purify him. The person being cleansed must wash his clothes and bathe with water, and that evening he will be clean. ²⁰ But if a person who is unclean does not purify himself, he must be cut off from the community, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on him, and he is unclean. ²¹ This is a lasting ordinance for them. “The man who sprinkles the water of cleansing must also wash his clothes, and

anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening. ²²
Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean, and anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening.”

19:2 *red heifer*. The qualifying words, “without defect or blemish,” are familiar in contexts of sacrificial worship in the OT. But this is not a sacrificial animal. It is a cow, not an ox; it is to be slaughtered, not sacrificed; and it is to be killed outside the camp, not at the holy altar. The ashes of the red heifer (v. 9) are the primary focus of this act, for they will be used in the ritual of the water of cleansing. The burning of the animal with its blood and offal (v. 5) is unprecedented in the OT. The normal pattern for the sacrifice of the burnt offering is given in Lev 1:3–9. In every respect the killing of the red heifer is distinct: A female animal was taken outside the camp to be killed; the priest had to be present, but he did not identify himself with it; and a bit of the heifer’s blood was sprinkled from the priest’s finger toward the tabernacle seven times, but the rest of the animal was to be burned in its entirety, without the draining of its blood or the cleansing of its offal. (CSB)

Reddish brown heifer (cow that had never been bred). No reason is given why the color of the sacrificial animal had to be red. (TLSB)

19:5 *its dung*. Undigested food in the animal’s bowels. (TLSB)

19:6 *cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool*. Associated with the cleansing properties of the ashes of the red heifer. (CSB)

Materials used in the purification from leprosy were added to the fire. (TLSB)

19:9 *water for impurity*. Water with the ash may have formed a weak lye solution. (TLSB)

impurity. Hbr word describes the ceremonial uncleanness incurred by a woman’s “discharge of blood” (Lv 15:25). (TLSB)

19:11–13 Contact with corpses or animal carcasses rendered the Israelites ritually unclean (Lv 5:2; 11:24–28; 21:1–4, 10–11; 22:4–7; Nu 6:6–12). The death of many in “the affair of Korah” (16:49) called for special measures of purification. The defilement was to be removed by the application of ritually prepared water. *cleanse himself ... thrown on him*. Washing by having water poured or dumped on the person requires less water than immersion. See p 1370. Cyprian: “It appears that the sprinkling also of water prevails equally with the washing of salvation” (ANF 5:401) (TLSB)

19:12 *purify himself with the water*. The ashes from the red heifer were kept outside the camp and would be mixed as needed with water to provide a means of cleansing after contact with dead bodies. (CSB)

19:13 *defiles the LORD’s tabernacle*. Willful neglect of the provision for cleansing brought not only judgment on the person, but also a pollution of the tabernacle itself. (CSB)

cut off from Israel. See note on Ex 12:15. (CSB)

19:14 *anyone who is in it.* There would be many occasions in which a person would become unclean, not because of deliberate contact with a dead body, but just by being in the proximity of one who died. (CSB)

19:18 *hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle.* Here the method of the cleansing ritual is explained. A ceremonially clean person had to sprinkle the ceremonially unclean person or thing. The cleansing power of the blood of Christ is specifically contrasted (“much more”; Heb 9:13–14) with the cleansing effectiveness of the water of the ashes of the red heifer. Cf. *cut off from his people* in Lev 7:20 and note. (CSB)

19:20 *thrown on him.* All rites to achieve ceremonial cleanness and purification of the flesh would not have spanned the gap between the holy God and sinful humankind if they had not pointed to the only acceptable sacrifice: Christ Jesus, who “offered Himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9:13–14). (TLSB)

Ch 19 God provides a means to cleanse those who had touched a corpse or accidentally come in contact with a bone of a dead person or a grave. Such a rite of purification foreshadows the cleansing power of Baptism. • Father of grace, we remember our Baptism and how You made us clean through water and the Word. Amen. (TLSB)