

NUMBERS

Chapter 5

The Purity of the Camp

The LORD said to Moses, ² **“Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has an infectious skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body.** ³ **Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.”** ⁴ **The Israelites did this; they sent them outside the camp. They did just as the LORD had instructed Moses.**

5:2–4 Moses enacted the purity laws recorded in Lv 13–15. Levitical laws protected the Israelite camp from defilement. Among those laws were regulations governing people found to have an infectious skin disease or any bodily discharge. Regulations also governed those who had touched dead bodies. Unclean individuals, whether male or female, were placed outside the camp (v 3). See p 300. After Israel settled in the Promised Land, unclean people were required to live outside cities and villages (cf 2Ki 7:3; 15:5). (TLSB)

5:2 *infectious skin disease.* See NIV text note; see also note on Lev 13:2; cf. Lk 5:12–16; 17:11–19. (CSB)

discharge of any kind. See note on Lev 15:2. Such discharges were primarily from the sexual organs and were chronic in nature (cf. Lk 8:43–48). The people who suffered from them became living object lessons to the whole camp on the necessity for all people to be “clean” in their approach to God. (CSB)

unclean. Ceremonially unfit to be with the community, and a possible contaminant to the tabernacle and the pure worship of the Lord. Aspects of uncleanness were not left in the abstract or theoretical; the focus was on tangible issues, such as clearly evident skin diseases and discharges. (CSB)

dead body. The ultimate tangible sign of uncleanness. Processes of decay and disease in dead flesh were evident to all. Physical contact with a corpse was a sure mark of uncleanness; normal contacts with the living would have to be curtailed until proper cleansing had been made. See note on 6:6 for application to the Nazirite vow. Jesus reached out to the dead as well as to the living; his raising of Jairus’s daughter began with holding her limp hand (Lk 8:54). (CSB)

5:3 *male and female alike.* The concept of clean versus unclean cuts across sexual lines. The essential issue was the presence of the Lord in the camp; there can be no uncleanness where he dwells. In the new Jerusalem (Rev 21:2–3) the dwelling of God with man will be uncompromised by any form of uncleanness (Rev 21:27). (CSB)

5:1–4 The ground is holy wherever the tent of meeting lodges. Defilement means death, for uncleanness is rooted in sin. Today, through Confession and Absolution, we may enter the

Lord's presence. Our corporate prayer of Confession reminds us that "we are by nature sinful and unclean" and that our salvation comes through Christ's mercy alone (*LSB*, p 167). • Lord, Your mercy enables us to walk anew in our Father's ways. Cleanse us for life in the communion of saints and life everlasting. Amen. (TLSB)

Restitution for Wrongs

5 The LORD said to Moses, **6** "Say to the Israelites: 'When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty **7** and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged. **8** But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to the LORD and must be given to the priest, along with the ram with which atonement is made for him. **9** All the sacred contributions the Israelites bring to a priest will belong to him. **10** Each man's sacred gifts are his own, but what he gives to the priest will belong to the priest.' "

5:5–6:21 The Lord provides Moses with laws for specific issues affecting the unity and purity of the camp. (TLSB)

5:5–10 The connection of these verses (on personal wrongs) with the first paragraph (on ritual uncleanness) may be that of moving from the outward, visible defects to the inward, more secret faults that mar the purity of the community. Those with evident marks of uncleanness are to be expelled for the duration of their malady. But more insidious are those people who have overtly sinned against others in the community, and who think that they may continue to function as though there was no wrong. (CSB)

5:7 *confess his sin.* During the guilt offering (Lv 5:14–6:7). (TLSB)

make full restitution. Theft is "breaking faith with the LORD" because He is the source of all things. The thief made restitution to the rightful owner or his kinsmen according to Lv 6:1–7. (TLSB)

fifth. Sin tax of 20 percent. (TLSB)

5:8 *restitution ... go to the LORD.* In case no rightful owner or kinsman could be found, the thief paid the penalties to the priest. (TLSB)

5:9–10 *holy donations ... shall be his.* Since the priest conducted the services of the offerings, he also partook of the offerings. (TLSB)

5:5–10 Any sinful act committed against another is considered "breaking faith with the LORD" (v 6). God expects His people to keep His Law, for that will be their wisdom and understanding in the sight of the people (Dt 4:6). Through the guilt offering, the sinner is reconciled to the Lord and to the community of faith. Today, God's people receive forgiveness through Confession and Absolution. However, do not neglect to make restitution for what you have done wrong. Freely honor the Lord's mercy by making restitution and by showing mercy toward others. The Lord, who takes away your sin, also freely grants you His promised Holy Spirit. • Precious Savior, by

Your grace, set us free from sin. Grant us Your Holy Spirit and thoughtful hearts for making restitution. Amen. (TLSB)

The Test for an Unfaithful Wife

¹¹ Then the LORD said to Moses, ¹² “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If a man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him ¹³ by sleeping with another man, and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act), ¹⁴ and if feelings of jealousy come over her husband and he suspects his wife and she is impure—or if he is jealous and suspects her even though she is not impure— ¹⁵ then he is to take his wife to the priest. He must also take an offering of a tenth of an ephah of barley flour on her behalf. He must not pour oil on it or put incense on it, because it is a grain offering for jealousy, a reminder offering to draw attention to guilt. ¹⁶ “ ‘The priest shall bring her and have her stand before the LORD. ¹⁷ Then he shall take some holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water. ¹⁸ After the priest has had the woman stand before the LORD, he shall loosen her hair and place in her hands the reminder offering, the grain offering for jealousy, while he himself holds the bitter water that brings a curse. ¹⁹ Then the priest shall put the woman under oath and say to her, “If no other man has slept with you and you have not gone astray and become impure while married to your husband, may this bitter water that brings a curse not harm you. ²⁰ But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and you have defiled yourself by sleeping with a man other than your husband”— ²¹ here the priest is to put the woman under this curse of the oath—“may the LORD cause your people to curse and denounce you when he causes your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell. ²² May this water that brings a curse enter your body so that your abdomen swells and your thigh wastes away.” “ ‘Then the woman is to say, “Amen. So be it.” ²³ “ ‘The priest is to write these curses on a scroll and then wash them off into the bitter water. ²⁴ He shall have the woman drink the bitter water that brings a curse, and this water will enter her and cause bitter suffering. ²⁵ The priest is to take from her hands the grain offering for jealousy, wave it before the LORD and bring it to the altar. ²⁶ The priest is then to take a handful of the grain offering as a memorial offering and burn it on the altar; after that, he is to have the woman drink the water. ²⁷ If she has defiled herself and been unfaithful to her husband, then when she is made to drink the water that brings a curse, it will go into her and cause bitter suffering; her abdomen will swell and her thigh waste away, and she will become accursed among her people. ²⁸ If, however, the woman has not defiled herself and is free from impurity, she will be cleared of guilt and will be able to have children. ²⁹ “ ‘This, then, is the law of jealousy when a woman goes astray and defiles herself while married to her husband, ³⁰ or when feelings of jealousy come over a man because he suspects his wife. The priest is to have her stand before the LORD and is to apply this entire law to her. ³¹ The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.’ ”

5:11–31 Again, the connection with the preceding two paragraphs seems to be a movement from the more open, obvious sins to the more personal, hidden ones. Issues of purity begin with physical marks (vv. 1–4), are expanded to interpersonal relationships (vv. 5–10), and then intrude into the most intimate of relationships—the purity of a man and woman in their marriage bed. A test for marital fidelity is far more difficult to prove than a test for a skin disorder; hence, the larger part of the chapter is given to this most sensitive of issues. (CSB)

5:11–31 A water test. The goal of the ordeal was to cause sincere confession of sin or of innocence. This unusual procedure has some parallels with practices in other cultures. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (c 1728–1686 BC) has a water test whereby a suspected wife was to throw herself into a river. (TLSB)

5:12 *wife*. Lit, “woman.” Married or betrothed. (TLSB)

breaks faith. Close association in a camp heightened temptation to commit adultery. Mishnah Sotah 1, which comments on these circumstances, assumes that the husband has warned his wife before witnesses. It also requires that he or another person stand as an official witness of her suspicious behavior. So, according to rabbinic accounts, the husband could not act on a whim. (TLSB)

5:13 *she is undetected*. No witnesses to the crime, but clear cause for suspicion and concern (circumstantial evidence). (TLSB)

5:14 *feelings of jealousy*. These may have been provoked on the basis of good cause, and the issue must be faced. The concern is not just for the bruised feelings of the husband but is ultimately based on the reality of God’s dwelling among his people (v. 3). Yet the chapter is designed to prevent unfounded charges of unfaithfulness. This text was not to be used by a capricious, petty or malevolent husband to badger an innocent woman. (CSB)

impure. The subject of the chapter is consistent; the purity of the camp where God dwells (v. 3) is the burden of the passage. (CSB)

5:15–28 The actions presented here seem severe and harsh. But the consequences would have been worse for a woman charged with adultery by an angry husband if there was no provision for her guilt or innocence to be demonstrated. That she was taken to the priest (v. 15) is finally an act of mercy. The gravity of the ritual for a suspected unfaithful wife shows that the law regards marital infidelity most seriously. This was not just a concern of a jealous husband. The entire community was affected by this breach of faith; hence, the judgment was in the context of the community. (CSB)

5:15 *grain offering of jealousy*. A husband, suspicious of his wife’s fidelity, brought a grain offering of remembrance. (TLSB)

bringing iniquity to remembrance. Plain offering to invoke the Lord’s memory, that He might establish her guilt or innocence. (TLSB)

5:16–22 To invoke God’s judgment upon the woman, she has to undergo a test. While holding the grain offering of remembrance and while under an oath of incrimination, she is asked to drink “holy water,” containing “the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle” (v 17). Her guilt or innocence becomes manifest by the results that this mixture causes inside her. This method of determining guilt or innocence was no magical process but depended on God’s direct intervention. There is no instance of this trial by ordeal in the biblical record. However, Mishnah Sotah 1:4 describes such proceedings taking place at the “great court” of the temple in Jerusalem. (TLSB)

5:16 *set her before the LORD.* Before the sanctuary. (TLSB)

5:17 *holy water.* From the bronze basin in the sanctuary (cf Ex 30:17–21). (TLSB)

dust. A second item of the sanctuary was added, making a murky solution. The significance of these elements is not entirely clear. (TLSB)

5:18 *loosen her hair.* A sign of openness; for the guilty, an expectation of judgment and mourning. (CSB)

Her head covering was removed, normally an act of mourning. But here the act raised the issue of immoral behavior (i.e., has she uncovered herself?). (TLSB)

bitter water that brings a curse. Or “curse-bringing water of bitterness.” It is not just that the water was bitter tasting but that the water had the potential of bringing with it a bitter curse. The Lord’s role in the proceedings (vv. 16, 21, 25) is emphasized repeatedly to show that this potion was neither simply a tool of magic nor merely a psychological device to determine stress. The verdict with respect to the woman was precipitated by her physiological and psychological responses to the bitter water, but the judgment was from the Lord. (CSB)

Wordplay in Hbr (*me hammarim ham’ararim*). The mixture likely tasted bitter (cf Ex 15:23), though bitterness can also denote feelings of anger and disappointment. *curse.* The oath (v 19), like a typical covenant in the Lord’s name, would involve a curse on the person speaking it. If one did not fulfill his word, harm would befall him. (TLSB)

5:19 *under your husband’s authority.* Betrothed or married. (TLSB)

5:21 *your thigh to waste away and your abdomen to swell.* See NIV text note. The figurative language here (and in vv. 22, 27) speaks of the loss of the capacity for childbearing (and, if pregnant, the miscarriage of the child). This is demonstrated by the determination of the fate of a woman wrongly charged (v. 28). For a woman in the ancient Near East to be denied the ability to bear children was a personal loss of inestimable proportions. Since it was in the bearing of children that a woman’s worth was realized in the ancient world, this was a grievous punishment indeed. (CSB)

By the oath, if she had committed adultery, she cursed her own womb and body. (TLSB)

5:22 *bowels ... womb.* The normal bodily course for water but with the potential of bringing the curse. (TLSB)

Amen, Amen. She swears the oath. (TLSB)

5:23–24 He makes her drink her own words/oath. (TLSB)

bitter pain. Perhaps the mixture caused physical distress. (TLSB)

5:26 *afterward ... drink the water.* A duplication in the sequence (cf v 23), because the note about the offering interrupted the account. (TLSB)

5:27 *the woman shall become a curse.* The curse, if fulfilled, would prove her guilty and change her status in the community (how is not explained). (TLSB)

5:28 The curse would not befall her if she were innocent. She could be reconciled with her husband and have a family with him. The reference to children may mean that a woman found guilty was divorced (Dt 24:1) and thereby bereft of children. (TLSB)

5:31 *man shall be free.* He did not undergo the trial and was not held liable for the outcome. However, consider the tensions existing within the woman's family or with the man suspected of committing adultery with her; cf Lv 20:10. (TLSB)

bear her iniquity. If found guilty. Some commentators point to this verse and the ordeal (vv 11–28) as examples of unfair and demeaning treatment of women in the Bible. Such an interpretation fails to appreciate the seriousness of adultery and its consequences. Adultery undermines people's lives in serious ways: trust is destroyed, inheritance comes into question, disease is spread, and children might be born without fatherly care. Adultery tears families and nations apart. Because women by nature bear children, they carry a special burden in such circumstances, which made them the focus of this ordeal. All of this heightens the special burden on husbands and fathers to properly love and care for wives and daughters, as clearly taught in Scripture (e.g., Eph 5:25–33; 6:4). (TLSB)

5:11–31 God provides recourse should a man suspect his wife of adultery, a most serious matter (Ex 20:14). In OT times, the penalty for adultery was death (Lv 20:10). God designed human sexuality for the blessed estate of marriage. Yet He also offers forgiveness through Christ for those who err and repent. • Almighty Father, keep us sexually pure, whether we are married or unmarried. In Jesus' name. Amen. (TLSB)