

NUMBERS

Chapter 5

Unclean People

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 “Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. 3 You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.” 4 And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

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 *discharge*. 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)

the dead. 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*. 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)

Confession and Restitution

5 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 6 “Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, 7 he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong. 8 But if the man has no next of kin to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for wrong shall go to the LORD for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made

for him. 9 And every contribution, all the holy donations of the people of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. 10 Each one shall keep his holy donations: whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his.”

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)

A Test for Adultery

11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 12 “Speak to the people of Israel, If any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, 13 if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, 14 and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, 15 then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah of barley flour. He shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance. 16 “And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD. 17 And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. 18 And the priest shall set the woman before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse. 19 Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings

the curse. 20 But if you have gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you, 21 then' (let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman) 'the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh fall away and your body swell. 22 May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, Amen.' 23 "Then the priest shall write these curses in a book and wash them off into the water of bitterness. 24 And he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings the curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain. 25 And the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy out of the woman's hand and shall wave the grain offering before the LORD and bring it to the altar. 26 And the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering, as its memorial portion, and burn it on the altar, and afterward shall make the woman drink the water. 27 And when he has made her drink the water, then, if she has defiled herself and has broken faith with her husband, the water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people. 28 But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children. 29 "This is the law in cases of jealousy, when a wife, though under her husband's authority, goes astray and defiles herself, 30 or when the spirit of jealousy comes over a man and he is jealous of his wife. Then he shall set the woman before the LORD, and the priest shall carry out for her all this law. 31 The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity."

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 *man's 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 *spirit 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)

defiled herself. 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 *unbind the 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)

water of bitterness that brings a curse. Or “*curse-bringing water of bitterness*. 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 fall away and your body swell*. 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)