

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truth of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

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Dear Reader

Brother Leslie M. Grant of Seattle WA has sent us another most helpful article for the Assembly Messenger. Many of us find it difficult to wade through all the rules and regulations given to Israel some 4000 years ago. We wonder why God has recorded these things and just assume these instructions are merely history and useful for a few history-buffs or perhaps Israelis who want to understand their heritage. But that is not the way of the Bible. The Old Testament, handled accurately, is God's book of *examples* for us today, written for our learning and admonition (Rom.15:4; 1 Cor.10:6, 11). It is His *illustration book* of His eternal principles. Therefore, we should expect to find help in those difficult books in carrying out principles of conduct for both individuals and assemblies. The chapters devoted to *leprosy* (Leviticus 13-14) illustrate this. On the surface, these chapters have little if any relevance to us today. Yet if we see them as illustrations of how to handle sin in the midst, understanding the great principle *throughout God's Word* that we must not be careless as to sin in our midst, we can learn many necessary truths. Let's see what brother Leslie has to say to us in this regard.

THE PLAGUE OF LEPROSY (LEVITICUS 13 AND 14)

The seriousness of the plague of leprosy is emphasized by the fact that two long chapters of scripture are devoted to this subject. The physical illness, which slowly destroys tissue and nerves, is a picture of that which is far more serious spiritually. In Leviticus 12 the sinful *nature* of mankind is dealt with. In Chapters 13 and 14 *leprosy* speaks of the outbreak of that nature in sinful activity.

A Spot on the Skin (Lev.13:1-46)

Though we are not responsible for having a sinful nature, yet we *are* responsible if we allow it to break out in sinful actions, and today those who form an assembly are responsible to discern and judge sin when it does break out among them. When something of a questionable character appeared on a person's skin, then he was to be brought to a priest in Israel (v.2), who was to examine him. As the skin is the *surface* of our bodies, so if something questionable comes to the surface in our lives, there is reason for concern, for sin, like leprosy, is a disease that begins internally and erupts on the surface. It may be less serious or more serious than it seems. Therefore, the case must be carefully examined. All the congregation could not examine him, but a fit representative of the congregation was to do so.

Thus, in the assembly today, though all believers are priests, yet it would be only those in whom priestly character is *developed* who are able to rightly discern and judge as to the seriousness of any suspected evil. Those who investigate such things should be those who have godly discernment and experience, and who know how to "have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray" (Heb.5:2).

If something appeared on the skin of an individual that turned into a sore similar to leprosy, then a priest was to examine him. If two symptoms were evident, the hair in the sore turned white and the sore was deeper than the skin, then no question remained: it was leprosy, and the priest was to pronounce the patient *unclean*. The white hair speaks of the decay of spiritual strength and the sore deeper than the skin indicates that the sin is not merely a light case of indiscretion, but a *determined course of sin*. To discern this requires true spiritual perception. Great care must be taken that any judgment must be under the guidance of God. But when the case is clear, then God's Word is clear: the person must be pronounced unclean.

On the other hand, though a bright spot may be white, if it did not appear to be deeper than the skin and its hair had not turned white, the priest's judgment must be delayed. The person was to be isolated for seven days. This would not speak of one being put out of fellowship, but only of his being deprived of certain privileges of practical fellowship for a time, until the matter is cleared. If no change had taken place after seven days, then another seven

days of probation were added. In that time, if the sore had faded and had not spread, the priest was to pronounce the person clean, and he needed only to wash his clothes. Everything was to appear *as clean* before the assembly.

However, if the sore had spread, the priest was to then pronounce the man as leprous. So for us today, if evil is at work it will spread (1 Cor.5:6); if not, it will fade. How do we discern this? The surest sign that evil is not active is seen in an attitude of self-judgment. In a case like this, an attitude of self-defense almost always indicates that the evil is at work. It may take a little time to be able to discern whether there is genuine self-judgment. Verse 7 indicates that there could seem to be self-judgment when it was not really there. If the same thing surfaced again, even after one was pronounced clean, the priest was again to examine the person and if finding the sore has spread, was to pronounce him unclean. If a believer falls into the same type of sin after being forgiven, this shows the *root* of the matter has not really been judged.

Verses 9 to 11 speak of one who has a leprous sore and the priest finds that the swelling is white, the hair is white and raw flesh appears in the sore. There is no question in this case: the person is pronounced unclean.

Yet if leprosy were to break out all over the skin, covering the patient from head to foot, and the examination of the priest confirmed this, then the person was pronounced *clean* (vv.12-13). This seems strange, but the spiritual significance is most important, for it speaks of one who had totally judged the sin of the flesh in himself: he is fully exposed before God.

But a caution is added: if *raw flesh* appeared on the person, he was unclean. The priest must again confirm this by examination and pronounce the person unclean, for raw flesh speaks of *active sin*. This might change again, however, the raw flesh disappearing and the sore becoming white, in which case the priest was to pronounce the patient clean (vv.16-17). Thus, recovery and restoration are still possible, and priestly discernment should be able to recognize a favorable change in the attitude of one who has before been in a bad condition.

One might have a boil that is healed, yet afterward develop from it a swelling or bright spot. The symptoms of leprosy must again be subject to the priest's examination and the same principles applied as to discerning whether or not it was leprosy. There are definitely things that differ, as the New Testament also teaches us. "A man overtaken in a fault" (Gal.6:1) is not the serious case of one who has *formed a habit* of being an adulterer, covetous, an idolater, a reviler, drunkard or extortioner (1 Cor.5:11). In the first case, one needs the restoring help of believers; in the second case it is required that he be put away from the fellowship of saints, though with the object of eventual recovery (2 Cor.2:6-11). Some cases are transparently clear, while others have such difficulty as to require special discernment. For this reason, time was given for the priest to be sure as to the case (v.21). If after time was given, the sore spread, the person was unclean: if there was no spreading the priest pronounced the patient clean (vv.22-23).

Leprosy could possibly develop from a *burn* also (v.24), in which case the same procedure was to be applied. A burn might be accidental, and there are some who may consider an accident, some chance-occurrence, as an excuse for engaging in sin. Therefore the priest was to examine the victim. If there was any doubt, he was to be shut up for seven days. When doubt was removed he was to be pronounced clean or unclean, as the case required (vv.25-28).

In verse 29-37 the matter of suspected leprosy in the *head* or *beard* is considered. Similar examination was necessary, and if leprosy were confirmed, the patient was unclean: if not, he was pronounced clean. Leprosy in the head speaks of the *intellect* being wrongly affected by doctrine that is a perversion of the truth. If it were only a matter of being *mistaken*, this could be corrected, but if one is *committed* to holding a seriously wrong doctrine, and after being labored with to seek to correct him, he is *determined* not to change, *then he is rendered unfit for the fellowship of saints*.

The Leper Put Outside (vv. 45-46)

When the case proved to be leprosy, the priest having pronounced the person unclean, that person was put outside the camp of Israel, with his clothes torn and his upper lip covered. He was then required to cry out, “Unclean, unclean.” Evidently he was to do this if anyone approached him. This compares with a New Testament case of one so seriously involved in sin that he must be put out from the local assembly (1 Cor.5:11-13) and all assemblies walking on scriptural ground (1 Cor.1:2).

Leprosy in a Garment (vv.47-59)

It may seem strange that leprosy might break out in a *garment*, and there is evidently no actual case of this recorded in scripture, so the *spiritual significance* of it must be the important matter. The garment speaks, not of the person, but of his *habits*. If something appeared suspect in the garment, the priest was to exercise the same care in examination as in the case of a person (vv.50-51), and if the plague was confirmed as leprosy, the garment was to be burned. Thus we should have priestly discernment as to any habits we may adopt — things we do. They may seem at first rather innocent, yet alarming symptoms may appear. If the habit has sin plainly involved in it, we should judge and totally refuse it.

In some cases there may be only an element in the habit that is questionable, so that, as a piece of a garment might be torn out (v.56), so the questionable element in any habit should be expunged. But after this, the plague might again appear in the garment, and if so, the whole garment was to be burned. So, if in a certain habit sin breaks out the second time, the habit is to be fully judged and refused.

Restoring a Leper (Lev.14:1-20)

Even a case of leprosy may be healed, though this is not frequently seen in the Old Testament. Miriam’s leprosy was healed very soon after she was infected (Num.12:9-16) because of the intercession of Moses. She was shut out of the camp only seven days. Naaman was healed of his leprosy, but he was a Gentile (2 Ki.5:1) and therefore the Jewish ritual would not apply to him. Many lepers were in Israel at that time, but none of them were healed (Lk.4:27). The Lord Jesus healed lepers (Mt.8:2-3; Lk.17:12-14) and told them to show themselves to the priests.

If a leper were healed he was to be brought to the priest (v.2) and the priest was to examine him outside the camp. The healing being confirmed, then the priest was to command that two live and clean birds should be brought, and cedar wood, scarlet and hyssop were to be dipped in the blood of the bird that was killed, “over running water” (v.5). The blood then was to be sprinkled seven times on the recovered leper, and the living bird let loose.

Both birds speak of Christ, the first, the bird killed in an earthen vessel, picturing His sacrifice on Calvary. The earthen vessel reminds us that He came in a human body (a vessel) of lowly humiliation to be a willing sacrifice. Running water or “living water” symbolizes the living power of the Spirit of God energizing the wonderful sacrifice, so that life would triumph over death.

The living bird is a picture of Christ in resurrection. The cedar wood represents all that is exalted and dignified in manhood, while the hyssop is the opposite, speaking of the lowliest of mankind. Whether high or low, rich or poor, Christ’s work is necessary for all, and sufficient for all; and the scarlet (in between) is the warmth of the love of God that brings all together. This is manifested only in Christ raised from among the dead. The blood sprinkled on all these tells us that in resurrection, the cross can never be forgotten, and the great blessing that Christ has accomplished for Himself in unity with His blood-bought people is dependent on His blood shed at Calvary. Thus, as the living bird is set free, so all believers are blessed in the liberty that belongs to Christ in resurrection,

Though those things in verses 1-7 are basic in the restoration of the leper, there are other practical details added in verses 8-20. First, there is cleansing by water, first of the person’s *clothes*, and after shaving off all his hair, then *himself* washed (v.8). The sacrifice of the bird has to do with what was done *for* him, but the washing of water is the application of the Word of God to his personal condition. We also need both. Yet even then he must stay outside his tent for seven days, though allowed inside the camp. On the eighth day he was to repeat what he had

done a week earlier, shaving off all his hair, including even his eyebrows, wash his clothes and his own body. Then we are told, “he shall be clean” (v.9).

In the first cleansing the person is restored to his place in the camp, while in the second he is fully restored to God and to his accustomed dwelling among the people of God, speaking of practical fellowship restored “through the washing of water by the Word.” All of this shows us that God provides the means of restoration for the appropriation of every returning wanderer. The person takes advantage of it and is thus restored (to the camp), yet God seeks a deeper work *within* the person, by which restoration becomes vital to him. In fact, in the following verses (10-32) there is much more instruction as to offerings to be made by the cleansed leper. Does this not tell us that God desires, not only that the leper should be cleansed, but that he should in his recovery be *a wholehearted, devoted worshiper of the living God*? This should speak to every believing heart.

Leprosy in a House (vv.33-47)

As in the case of a garment, it seems strange that leprosy could literally be present in a house. No example of this is recorded in Scripture either. Again therefore, the *spiritual significance* must be the matter of real importance. If the owner of a house found evidence of such a plague in his house, he must report it to the priest, who would examine it.

Note that in verse 34 the *Lord* might “put the leprous plague in a house.” This might be specially the case in application to the “whole house of Israel” (Lev.10:6). God caused Israel’s bad spiritual condition to awaken alarm even before the days of David. The prophets have examined that “house” and with one consent have found it in such a state as Isaiah 1:6 describes, “From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores.” There have been many efforts by God to restore the nation, even after its being taken into captivity, symbolizing its isolation. But finally, in rejecting Christ, Israel has exposed its hopeless leprous condition. Christ makes the pronouncement, “Your house is left to you desolate” (Mt.23:38), and the whole house has been taken away. It will therefore be a miracle of God that will restore the house of Israel, as will be true in the millennium, as Ezekiel 36:36 declares, “I, the Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and planted what was desolate.”

As was true of the house of Israel in its being under suspicion of leprosy, a similar application is true of the professing Church. God has dealt with her alarming symptoms in seeking to restore her, but her state has deteriorated, so the exposure of leprosy is clearly seen in the address to Laodicea (Rev.3:14-22). She is about to be spit out of the Lord’s mouth (v.16), involving His refusal of her. Laodicea professes to be God’s church, but is composed of mainly unbelievers. It is plainly a leprous house, ready to be demolished.

Yet there is an application also to a local fellowship of professed believers. If sin that seems to be of a serious character breaks out among them, the matter should be immediately put into the hand of the Lord, the One having true priestly discernment. Of course others also from another assembly, men of spiritual experience and priestly discernment, may unite with the Lord in forming a judgment as to whether this is a case that demands rigorous action, and as to how far this action should go.

Even if the plague appeared serious to the priest, he was to wait for a week before a second examination (vv.37-38). If then the plague had spread, the priest was to command that the stones in which the plague was, should be taken out and thrown into an unclean place (v.44). This would speak of individuals who have been guilty of positive sinful practice being excommunicated from fellowship — “from among yourselves” (1 Cor.5:13).

The house was also to be scraped, picturing the self-judgment of all in the house in divesting themselves of any association with the evil. New stones were added in place of the old and the house was freshly plastered (v.42). But if the plague came back after this, it was evident that the leprosy was settled into the house itself, and the priest was to *break down the house*, having all of it taken to an unclean place, outside the city (vv.44-45). So any assembly in which serious evil persists after proper labor with it, *is totally unfit for anyone’s fellowship*. Other assemblies must cease all identification with it. Also, anyone who had even come into the house would be unclean till the evening, but if he had laid down in the house or if one had eaten in the house, he must wash his clothes. Thus today also, if we are only *present* in a location where spiritual evil is practiced, we are defiled by it, and more so if we linger in the place. This is a serious consideration for every Christian. Association with sin defiles!

Cleansing of a House (vv.48-52)

If after the house was freshly plastered there was no recurrence of any plague, the priest was to pronounce the house clean. However, he was to follow the same procedure as in the case of the cleansing of a

leprous person (ch.14:1-7), taking two birds with cedar wood, scarlet and hyssop, killing one bird in an earthen vessel over running water, and with this sprinkle the house seven times (v.51). When this cleansing was complete, the priest was to let loose the live bird into the open field (v.52). We have seen that the sacrificed bird is a picture of Christ sacrificed for us, and the live bird, Christ raised from among the dead. Again therefore, as with a person, so with an assembly, restoration is based on the value of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

May we all learn to have diligent energy of faith to maintain the purity of the truth of God by properly judging evil in ourselves and in our associations, and also genuine concern and prayer for fullest restoration of individuals who have been overtaken by sin and of assemblies who have been in any measure threatened by inroads of evil.

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