

Who Will Deliver Me From This Body of Death? Leviticus 11-15

We are back in the book of Leviticus this morning, and as we begin, I want to read about a war that is waging inside every Christian – it’s a war that you have probably felt and struggled with – a war between your flesh and spirit.

Romans 7:18-24 says: *“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*

I don’t know if you can relate to that struggle, but I can. I became a Christian when I was 14 years old. Something changed inside me – something new was born. I felt sorry for my sin and wanted to repent and live a life that was pleasing to God. And because of that change, a battle began between my flesh and spirit and I started to fight against sin I could see in my life.

That was over 30 years ago and you’d think that by now I’d be practically sin free. I went to church, I went to Bible College, I’ve been a pastor for over 20 years, temptation and sin really shouldn’t be an issue for me anymore, right? I wish that was the case, but it’s not. What I’ve found to be true is the battle between the flesh and spirit continues: *“I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”*

I would guess that you are familiar with that same struggle and have asked yourself that same question from time to time: “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We know that our sins are forgiven – Jesus shed his blood to wash them all away. We were justified – declared to be righteous the day we

turned to him in faith. But we still struggle with sin. It's deeply entrenched in our flesh and keeps trying to rear its ugly head. This can be very troubling and we can wonder if we're even saved. Who will deliver us from this body of death?

We are going to look at a series of chapters in Leviticus this morning that are very difficult to understand. My brain may have been smoking a few times this week as I tried to make sense of them. But eventually God directed me to an explanation that seems to make sense and brings us to the answer to the question: Who will deliver us from this body of death?

These 5 chapters have to do with things that could make a person ceremonially "unclean," in the new Israelite community. To be unclean was a major problem. Leviticus 17:16 says that the person who is "unclean" is one who "bears their iniquity." So to be unclean meant your sins weren't covered by the sacrifice of atonement anymore and you were incompatible with the holiness of God, unfit to be in his presence or participate in public worship. If you came before him and were unclean, you would die. Being unclean was a major problem. In these chapters, God told the Israelites what would make them unclean and he also taught them what they could do to become clean again.

You would think that these chapters would be full of sinful behaviors that would make a person unclean, but if you read through them, you find out that's not the case. The things that made them unclean were mostly circumstances and conditions that people were in as a normal part of human life. So these chapters can be very confusing and even seem unfair. But there's something I'll show you at the end that I think ties everything together and will help make sense of why God gave his people these regulations.

Chapter 11 gives instructions about what animals the Israelites could and couldn't eat. They could eat those that were clean, but not those considered unclean. The instructions are summed up in the last two verses – Lev. 11:46-47: *"This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, ⁴⁷ to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten."*

If we were to read through the chapter, we would see that of all the animals that fill the earth, sky, and water, there were some that were “clean” and all the rest were considered “unclean.” Animals that were “clean” could be eaten, and animals that were “unclean” could not. Furthermore, if an animal died and a person had to touch or carry the carcass, they would become “unclean.”

The passage doesn't say why God chose which animals would be clean and unclean, it just says what they were. Some theologians have seen a correlation between health concerns and eating some of the “unclean” animals, but it is certainly not a universal factor for all of them. I also read other explanations, but none of them made sense of all the distinctions. All I could tell is that if God said it was clean, it was clean, and if God said it was unclean, it was unclean.

The main thing is that the Israelites were to only eat animals that were clean and if they touched the carcass of a dead animal, which they would have had to do quite regularly, they would become unclean and had to wash themselves and wait for a certain period of time before they would become clean again. So these regulations are strange and confusing. But now we get to chapter 12 and things seem to go from confusing to seemingly unfair. In the remaining 4 chapters God continues to differentiate between the clean and unclean only now it has to do with people and situations related to gender, unfortunate skin diseases, and natural bodily discharges.

Chapter 12 says that after a woman gives birth, she is unclean. If it's a boy, she's unclean for 7 days, and had to go through a 33 day purification process, and if it's a girl, it's twice as long. During this time she was unfit to be in God's presence and had to be excluded from public worship. Now, for a woman to give birth isn't wrong or sinful. In fact, the Israelites were encouraged to have children – children were seen as a blessing from the Lord. So why would a new mom be considered unclean? This feels pretty unfair.

Chapters 13 & 14 get into a whole bunch of regulations having to do with skin diseases, which they generally called “leprosy.” And I'm not going to go into all the gross details, but it basically says that when someone had some kind

of blemish, boil, rash, burn, or infection, they were unclean and had to go through a long road of examinations, quarantine, and then either a ceremonial cleansing process or banishment from the community. Leviticus 13:45-46 says, “*The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean.’*”⁴⁶ *He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease. He is unclean. He shall live alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp.*”

I’m pretty sure no one in the camp was trying to get a skin disease any more than any of us wants one, but when someone did, they were considered “unclean.” Why would God do that? Was he concerned with bad hygiene or spreading disease? Certainly some of those issues could have been present, but the chapter doesn’t focus on that at all. It doesn’t say those were the reasons. So again, this feels unfair.

The final chapter (which is chapter 15) has to do with regulations regarding bodily discharges. Again, I’ll spare you the disturbing details, but it’s primarily talking about things that are unintentional, or natural occurrences in the human body, or between a husband and wife. Anyone or anything that came into contact with someone who had a bodily discharge became unclean and had to go through a purification process. But again, these weren’t sinful things or bad things, they were natural, and marital relations were considered a blessing. So why does it feel like God is punishing them?

What’s the deal? Not only do these things seem confusing, but also unfair. A few of the comments that I read basically concluded that God is God and can do whatever he wants, even if it doesn’t make sense to us. But the Bible also tells us that God is just and does not show favoritism. So how can these regulations not be unfair toward people, especially women, those with skin diseases and married couples?

I read a lot of complicated explanations and no one was really saying the same thing. But I found an explanation in the Reformation Study Bible that seems to make the most sense to me. Here’s what it says: “*The basic idea is that God is perfect life, while the essence of uncleanness is death. Normal, healthy creatures were clean, but abnormal or unhealthy creatures, and*

particularly corpses, were unclean. Abnormalities that suggested or that could lead to death were marks of uncleanness. Life and death were not to be mixed, so the unclean was never to enter God's presence... The flow of blood after childbirth made a mother unclean. Loss of blood could lead to death, thus illustrating the equation of uncleanness with death or the threat thereof.... The key principle in identifying a skin disease as "unclean" was whether the skin seemed to be rotting away, suggesting the spiritual principle of death... The person afflicted with a serious skin disease behaved as a mourner. He was excluded from the camp, not to protect the health of Israel, but because God was in the camp and uncleanness (death) had to be separated from the presence of God (life)... All the cases of bodily discharge involve the loss of bodily fluids, and any loss of a "life fluid" suggested death and was incompatible with the presence of God, who is perfect life."

This is the only explanation that makes sense to me. Everything that made a person unclean was something that had to do with death in some way – a carcass, loss of blood, rotting skin, and loss of bodily fluid. God did not allow anything resembling death to be in his presence – it had to be cleansed or purified.

After reading that explanation I started thinking more about the biblical teaching about death and I soon started to see the relationship between death and sin. We already know that sin was a problem for the people of Israel. Exodus and Leviticus is filled with regulations for how the Israelites had to deal with sin so that God could dwell in their midst. That's what the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices were for. But now I'm beginning to see that death was a big problem as well and I think I know why. Romans 6:23 says "The wages of sin is death." Romans 5:12 talks about the origin of death and says: "*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.*" So the relationship between sin and death is a tight relationship. Death is the penalty for sin. Death is the curse of sin. It is the consequence of sin, and the fruit of sin. There is a very direct link between sin and death.

And that's the reason I think all these particular things mentioned in Leviticus 11-15 made a person unclean. The Old Testament Explorer says: "*Though the loss of blood and other fluids was not inherently sinful, it symbolized the*

process of decay, disease, and death, all the fruits of human sin and fallenness.”

So just as much as God could not allow sin to be in his presence and had to provide a way for his people to deal with it through the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices, he also could not allow death to be in his presence or anything that had to do with it, and he had to provide a way for his people to deal with that as well, which is exactly what he does in Leviticus 11-15. He told them where the presence of death would show up and how it would make the people unclean and unfit for his presence, and he told them how they could cleanse and purify themselves so they could be in his presence again. So not only did he deal with the penalty of sin, he also dealt with the consequence of sin which was death.

At the beginning of the sermon I brought up the battle between the flesh and spirit going on inside those of us who are Christians. We've been born again and given a new life in Christ. Our sins have been forgiven and we've been justified before God. But we still carry around in our bodies the consequences of sin – fleshly cravings that wage war against our spirit. This battle can be very troubling and cause us to question our salvation: “Am I truly saved if I still have this struggle? Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

That's the question Paul raises at the end of Romans 7, and here's his answer: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He goes on in Romans 8 to say that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ even though we experience this struggle with sin, because Christ condemned sin in the flesh when he died on the cross. He has set us free from the law of sin and death. The struggle doesn't mean we aren't saved, on the contrary, it indicates that the Spirit of God dwells in you. It's if you don't struggle with sin and don't care about it that you should be concerned.

So in the same way that God provided cleansing for the consequence of sin for the people of Israel, he has also provided cleansing for the consequences of sin that we still feel in the battle that's going on in these bodies of death. Through Christ, God has given us his Spirit to dwell in us to carry out the cleansing process of sanctification in our lives. It is a process that produces the struggle we feel, and will continue through our lives. But it will one day be

completed when these bodies of death actually die and we are given new, glorified, resurrection bodies that will no longer be subject to sin.

There are two ways I think we should respond to these things. The first is to worship the Lord with hearts full of gratitude for all he's accomplished for us and is accomplishing for us right now through his death on the cross. We have the opportunity to do that as we move into a time of worship. The second way is to fully cooperate with Christ in the battle from this day forward. We are in a fight until the day we die! And in Romans 8 Paul tells us that we have an obligation to live by the Spirit and die to the flesh because of who we are in Christ, and all that Christ has done for us, and all that we have to look forward to in heaven. So let us arm ourselves for battle and continue the fight each day until the Lord takes us home.