

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 11

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

CHAPTER 19-20

INTRODUCTION

Once again, God provided His people the means of purifying themselves from the defilement of touching dead bodies so that they might not defile the tabernacle. In chapter 19, God established an ordinance of the law that required “a red heifer” to be offered for the cleansing of those who were defiled.¹ Chapter 20 records Israel’s final stretch of their journey from Kadesh to the plains of Moab before entering into the Promised Land. The chapter also records Miriam and Aaron’s death. The people once more murmured against Moses and Aaron. God graciously and miraculously gave them water to drink. Israel was refused passage through the land of Edom.

We remember Paul’s exhortation to the Romans that “for whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning (underscoring the writer’s), that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (15:4). In another letter, Paul reiterated this,

¹ Heifer. A young cow. Heifers were clean animals and were often sacrificed. They were esteemed for their milk and were used to thresh grain. A trained heifer symbolised obedience (Hosea 10:11), while a stubborn heifer represented disobedience (Hosea 4:16) [The *Applied Bible Dictionary*, general editor: Lawrence O. Richards.

“Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition (1 Corinthians 10:11); and to Timothy, his fellow co-worker in the LORD, he wrote, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Like all the rest of Scriptures, these two chapters afford many precious gems concerning people, personalities, conduct and behaviour, and not the least about the LORD our God whom we worship and serve.

OUTLINE

A. The Ordinance of the Law of the Red Heifer Ritual (19:1-10).

1. The LORD commanded the enactment of the ordinance of the law (19:1-2a).
2. The ritual of the red heifer (19:2b-10).
 - a) The red cow must be young, unblemished, and never worked under a yoke (2b).
 - b) The priest would personally attend to the slaughter of the cow outside the camp (3).
 - c) The priest would sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times before the tabernacle (4).
 - d) The heifer would be burned before the priest, who would add cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet (5-6).
 - e) The priest and another who assisted him must be ritually cleansed before they could re-enter the camp (7-8).

- f) The ashes of the heifer would be kept for the people for a purification of sin (9).
- g) The man who collected the ashes must be ritually cleansed (10).

B. The Purification of the People from Uncleaness by the Ritual of the Water of Separation (19:11-22).

1. The touching of a dead man rendered an Israelite unclean for seven days (19:11).
2. The Israelite must be sprinkled with the water of separation (19:12).
3. The penalty for defiling the tabernacle by an unclean person (19:13).
4. The law relating to death in the tent of an Israelite (19:14-16).
 - a) All who were in the house and who entered the tent were unclean (14).
 - b) Every open vessel would be unclean (15).
 - c) Any one who touched a dead body or even a part of it would be unclean (16).
5. The application of the water of separation for purification (19:17-22).
 - a) The ashes of the burnt heifer would be mixed in water (17).
 - b) The contents would be dipped with hyssop and sprinkled on the tent, and the vessels, and all the unclean persons on the third and seventh day (18-19a).
 - c) The person who administered the ritual must wash himself (19b).
 - d) Anyone who refused to be purified would be cut off from the congregation (20).

- e) This would be a perpetual statute (21-22).

COMMENTARY

These two chapters record another ceremonial cleansing for the people so that they might not sin and die. Miriam's death was briefly reported. The people once more murmured against Moses and Aaron. Their attempt to approach Canaan through the land of Edom was refused. Aaron died and the mantle of high priest was transferred to Eleazar, his son.

Once again, it is good to be reminded of Paul's exhortation to the Romans, "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope (15:4, underscoring mine). In another letter, Paul mentions, "Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition" (1 Corinthians 10:11). In his pastoral letter to young Timothy, Paul reminded him that "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

The many precious lessons that we can learn from these two chapters, the knowledge of God and His will, and about human kind, and how we can apply them in our daily living are valuable and immeasurable.

THE RED HEIFER ORDINANCE

God once again demonstrated His goodness and grace. Although God is love, He is also holy and He has shown

that He does not tolerate sin. The person, who sins by breaking His commandment, must be punished. Any person, who came in contact with a dead body, was declared ceremonially unclean and could not approach the tabernacle. And those, who came into contact with such persons, were also unclean. Death is a common occurrence and experience of the more than two million Israelites. There would be many that would be in this category of uncleanness. That being so, God instructed Moses and Aaron to establish the ordinance of “the red heifer”.

A red young cow would be chosen. It must be without any blemish, and without having been put to work. It would be taken to the priest, who would then take it a distance out of the camp, to be slaughtered before his eyes. The priest would then dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle the tabernacle seven times. Then he would burn the whole heifer—skin, flesh, blood and dung—in his sight (19:5). The next thing he had to do was to cast into the fire cedar wood, sprigs of hyssop, and scarlet wool. The ashes of the heifer would be collected, stored and used for the preparation of the ritual of purification (19:9). When a person was ceremonially unclean because of his contact with a dead body, he must be cleansed by the application of the “water of purification” (19:13). This purifying process was prepared by taking the ash of the heifer mixed with fresh water and sprinkled on the unclean person with a sprig of hyssop. It must be done twice, once on the third day, and another on the seventh. The extent of the uncleanness included the tent of the deceased, all those who were in the tent or who came in, and also all open vessels in the tent (19:14, 15).

This cleansing ritual is quite unique for several reasons. The colour of the cow must be red, unlike the other animals where the colour is immaterial. It must however be without any blemish. The cow had to be taken by the priest out of the camp and be killed in his presence. Another difference was that the whole heifer, together with its blood, skin, flesh and dung, was burnt and cedar wood, sprigs of hyssop and scarlet wool were added in the burning. And finally, the ashes were collected and stored for future use.

It might seem strange that the sprinkling of fresh water mixed with the ashes of the heifer was used to for cleansing as instructed by God, while all the other rituals for sin cleansing involved the application of blood. If examined more closely, this ritual of the red heifer had all the elements of a sin offering. A young animal without blemish was used. Blood was used. The animal was burnt.

The spiritual signification doubtlessly pictures the Lord Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews compares the heifer that was offered in the Old Testament for the sanctifying of people with the atoning work of Christ. Examining the ritual more closely, it had all the elements that are associated with cleansing in the New Testament. The ashes contained the element of blood and it was a once-for-all sacrifice that had continuing efficacy. Water symbolises in Scripture the Word of God and the Spirit of God. The believer, who sins, is convicted of his sin by the Holy Spirit speaking in and through His Word. He is thus brought afresh to the Cross for cleansing and renewal. In his first letter, John speaks of ready availability of the forgiveness and cleansing of sin in the blood of Christ, when a Christian

is convicted of his sin and confesses it (1 John 1:7). So also is the ordinance of the red heifer. This is indeed evidence of God's graciousness towards His people. The ritual is available to anyone in the camp without cost and he could be cleansed and be restored back to the community. It was very serious if one who was defiled refused to be cleansed. The God of love does not tolerate such insolence and rebellion. The penalty was severe. The person was "cut off" from the community. He awaited God's sure judgement upon him.

NOT AGAIN!

The people once again murmured against Moses and Aaron. They were now in Kadesh. But before we look into the incident, Miriam's death is briefly mentioned. There is no mention of her age, but she must be over one hundred years old being the elder sister of Moses. Miriam's death was in fulfilment of God's judgement upon all those who murmured against Moses and Aaron that they could not enter the Promised Land. Miriam was one of those murmured and complained against Moses. It serves as a reminder that God is displeased with those that are self-willed and disobedient to Him.

There was no water in Kadesh and the people again gathered themselves together and opposed Moses and Aaron. They chided and charged Moses and Aaron in no uncertain terms. They accused Moses for leading them and their cattle to die in the wilderness. They even used the name of God - that God would not have led them to die there! Like always, Moses and Aaron went away from them. They went to the door of the Tabernacle where they both "fell upon their face" (20:6). The glory of the LORD then appeared to them.

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron. The LORD told them to take the rod and "speak ye unto the rock." Water would gush out of the rock and the congregation would be provided with water. We are appalled at the insensitivity of the people towards Moses and Aaron. Their sister Miriam had just died. How insensitive and inconsiderate the people could be to murmur and complain against their leaders who had suffered so much opposition and humiliation from them, and now this! Again the LORD had been merciful and gracious. Instead of sending a plague to smite all the rebels, this time He provided them with water. He did not deal with them according to their sins.

A very sad thing happened. Moses and Aaron clearly lost their temper. So when one loses his temper, one will speak foolishly. It is evidenced by the words that were spoken by them. In all probability, Moses was the spokesman and remarked, "Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of the rock?" (20:10) In his anger, he and Aaron, who was with him, did not give God the glory and honour. He was guilty of the sin of presumption when he said, "Must WE" bring water from the rock. And instead of speaking to the rock, he hit it twice. He made another mistake, the sin of disobedience and unbelief. God sees the heart and mind of everyone. He knew what Moses thought at the moment. Moses doubted whether water would gush out when he spoke to the rock. In the previous incident, he was told to strike the rock. This time he was told to speak, but he did not, because of unbelief. The LORD then penalised Moses and Aaron. Both of them were not allowed to lead the people into the Promised Land.

If the punishment of God is harsh to Moses and Aaron, in spite of the fact that these two had served the LORD faithfully, a lesson about God is missed. God reveals that He is absolutely holy, and He expects His servants to obey Him implicitly. God is also loving and gracious, but the grace of God is never a ground for people to be complacent or presumptuous. God's judgement upon Moses and Aaron teaches us that some of our temporal privileges and blessings can be taken away because of our sins of carelessness or neglect or unbelief.

THE SIN OF PRIDE

It was time to move on. Without the prompting from the LORD, Moses wrote to the Edomites for a safe passage through their land to Canaan. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the elder brother of Jacob, Israel. They were therefore cousins. Moses carefully worded his request, assuring the Edomite brethren that he would not impose on them, but just let them pass through the land. Moses' reason is quite obvious. It was a shorter way. But the Edomites refused the Israelites passage through their land. They warned Moses that they would be unkind to them if they passed through their land. They would come up against them and kill them (20:18, 20).

This is another sad incident. Brothers and cousins should help one another. Whatever misunderstandings in the past should be forgiven and forgotten. But the Edomites would not. They were hereditary enemies. While they had acted within their right, they were proud and unkind towards their blood cousins. The LORD heard and knew. The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Obadiah referred to this incident. They condemned Edomites for their pride and arrogance. The LORD

judged them and destroyed them because of their pride. This incident is recorded for our learning. Pride or haughtiness goes before a fall. The writer of Proverbs (16:5) exhorts, "Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished."

THE LORD TOOK AARON

Another sad incident. The LORD told Moses and Aaron to go up to Mount Hor, where He was going to take Aaron away. The mantle would then pass on to Eleazar, Aaron's son. The reason for taking away Aaron was that he disobeyed God at Meribah. While Aaron was not the spokesman, Moses was, nevertheless he was equally guilty because they were together in it. Nothing is said about how Aaron felt and thought. He quietly submitted to the will of the LORD. He took Eleazar, his son, and together with Moses, went up the mountain Hor in the sight of whole congregation. Moses stripped Aaron of the high priestly garment and put them on Eleazar. Having completed the change, Aaron died there on Mount Hor. Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. The people did not see Aaron with them, and obviously they were told that Aaron died; they mourned his death.

The phrase, "be gathered unto his people" was a phrase used many times in the Old Testament to describe death. It was used of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses (Genesis 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Numbers 31:2). The phrase is more than a figure of speech. Wenham comments (*Numbers*, 153), "It describes the central Old Testament conviction about life after death, that in Sheol, the place of the dead, where people would be united with other

members of their family. This is as David said of Bathsheba's baby when he died."²

It has been said, "God buries His workers, and carries on His work."
AMEN

² 2 Samuel 12:23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS**

**MONDAY: Numbers 19:1-10;
1 Corinthians 10:4-12.³**

1. What were the three things in which the offering of the heifer was different from the other sacrificial offerings?

³ 1 Corinthians 10:4 And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. 5 But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. 6 Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. 7 Neither be ye idolaters, as *were* some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. 8 Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. 9 Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. 10 Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. 11 Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. 12 Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

2. Should the Jews or the church carry out this red heifer ritual today? If the answer is “No,” why not?

TUESDAY: Numbers 19:11-22; 1 John 1:7; Ephesians 5:25-27.⁴

3. What was the purpose of the “water of purification”?

⁴ 1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; 26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

4. How do Christians today being “cleansed” when they are defiled by sin in their daily living?

WEDNESDAY: Numbers 20:1-13; Psalm 106:33; Psalm 119:66; 2 Kings 17:14.⁵

5. Did Miriam die naturally of old age or her death was a judgement of the LORD?

⁵ Psalm 106:33 Because they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips.

Psalm 119:66 Teach me good judgement and knowledge: for I have believed thy commandments.

2 Kings 17:14 Notwithstanding they would not hear, but hardened their necks, like to the neck of their fathers, that did not believe in the LORD their God.

6. In what way were the people heartless and insensitive in rebelling against Moses and Aaron at this time?

7. It seems a small thing that Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it, and for that Moses and Aaron were banned from entering the Promised Land. What were the reasons?

THURSDAY: Numbers 20:14-21; Amos 1:11; Obadiah 1:1-3; Proverbs 16:5.⁶

8. Do you think the Edomites should let Israel pass through their land? If the answer is "Yes," what are the reasons?

9. In what way is Aaron's death a judgement of the LORD, and also a blessing?

⁶ Amos 1:11 Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not turn away *the punishment* thereof; because he did pursue his brother with the sword, and did cast off all pity, and his anger did tear perpetually, and he kept his wrath for ever:

Obadiah 1:1 The vision of Obadiah. Thus saith the Lord GOD concerning Edom; We have heard a rumour from the LORD, and an ambassador is sent among the heathen, Arise ye, and let us rise up against her in battle. 2 Behold, I have made thee small among the heathen: thou art greatly despised. 3 The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, Who shall bring me down to the ground?

Proverbs 16:5 Every one *that is* proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: *though* hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

FRIDAY: Numbers 20:22-29; 2 Samuel 12:23; Hebrews 7:23-27.⁷

10. How would you feel and think if the LORD tells you or you know that you are going to die tomorrow?

⁷ 2 Samuel 12:23 But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.

Hebrews 7:23 And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: 24 But this *man*, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. 25 Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. 26 For such an high priest became us, *who is* holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; 27 Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.