

Numbers 19:1-22

There is nothing you've done or that has been done to you that outmatches what Jesus has done for you.

I have Vitiligo. Maybe you've noticed - an autoimmune condition that tricks my body into thinking pigment is a foreign substance to be killed.

What began as a couple of spots here and there has become having large swaths of my body whiter. As if I could be any whiter!

As the prevalence of vitiligo has increased, it has almost become fashionable. Models make it look cool. But insurance companies see treating it as cosmetic so not much is done to reverse it.

Still risks remain. Susceptible to increased damage from the sun. Perhaps decreased production of vitamin D. And beyond these, there are psychological effects.

It is not necessarily the result of anything I did, but the environments I was in. Still, there hasn't been a day in the last 25 years that I haven't thought about it. Where I haven't seen it. I am still beautiful, yes, but it is always there. Skin deep.

This experience matches deeper things in me too. Shame over things I've done, and things done to me that scream that I am unworthy - not meant to belong.

And the cosmic enemy, the devil, the accuser of the brethren - uses these things to distract and as evidence of being unlovable. Unsavable. Unclean.

Even my inability to kill sin in my heart, or avoid it in the world, pile on and add to the volume. I don't feel as free as the good news declares that I am.

Maybe you've experienced something like this. The result of what you've done, or what's been done to you.

But there is something that outmatches all of that. That silences the accuser. And we see it in the wilderness; the provision to be clean.

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We have come to the end of the middle section of Numbers. We have seen lots of grumbling, revolt against God and his plan, the people called to lead. Along with that there has been a lot of death.

Korah's rebellion had those scorched attempting to be priests, families swallowed up by the ground, and more than fourteen thousand dead from a plague of judgment.

Death is anatema, opposite of Yahweh, so much so that being near it makes you ceremonially unclean. The giver of life will not have his presence smitten by death.

Given the circumstances, the proximity to one another in the camp, it seems unavoidable.

God makes a way to be made clean. A perpetual statute for Israel and those journeying with them.

Potion, Person, Perfect.

Potion

Like the book discovered in Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince, this recipe works.

The need has been established.

Numbers 19:11–13a “Whoever touches the dead body of any person shall be unclean seven days. [12] He shall cleanse himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and so be clean. But if he does not cleanse himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not become clean. [13] Whoever touches

a dead person, the body of anyone who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD...” (ESV)

Even those that come into a tent where death has been are tainted by it. The call is to be clean or be cut off.

God’s provision calls for Eleazar, the son of Aaron, to take a red cow, perfect and spotless, outside the camp to slaughter it. He would sprinkle its blood toward the tabernacle seven times. Then it was to be burned - skin, flesh, dung, and blood. Adding to it cedarwood, scarlett year (red things) and hyssop (which is used to sprinkle blood on the altar).

Necessity of blood. Life to save life. Modeled before. It is that significant, our sin and uncleanness, that blood must be shed.

Death is that significant and so opposed to life, to God, it has to be dealt with.

Ashes then collected, kept just outside the camp for when someone was unclean - when fresh water (living water) would be added and this mixture used to sprinkle clean property and people who had been tainted by death. Third and seventh day.

Seventh day, bathe themselves, and their clothes, and in the evening they shall be clean.

Kept as water for impurity for Israel. Jewish scholars believe they only ever slaughtered three red heifers. The ashes last.

“Everyone needed the cleansing that the Lord provided for them in this chapter, which itself was a profound picture of the ultimate cleansing the Lord would provide for the sins of his people. Through the regular application of the water of cleansing, the Lord promised to purify all those who had become contaminated by contact with death.” ID

The way to be clean.

More than a potion of blood here.

Person

In addition to the centrality of blood in this ritual, the other remarkable, even paradoxical feature of this sacrifice was its power to defile the ones preparing and administering it. At the same time as the ashes made the defiled person clean, they also made the ceremonially clean person defiled.

While the sacrifice was vital to make ashes, while fresh water was needed; none of it could be done without a clean person willing to be made unclean in the process.

The priest preparing it was made unclean. The one who gathered the ashes for us, made unclean. And the one who would apply the sin offering, sprinkling the unclean where themselves made unclean.

“Through the sacrifice of the red cow, cleansing was made easily available to all in the community, both native-born and alien alike (v. 10). The cost of the cleansing was kept low to the ones being cleansed. Yet the cost for the ones who made the offering on their behalf was substantial. It was not simply that the community had to bear the financial cost of sacrificing the cow. The one making the offering also had to temporarily sacrifice his own state of ritual cleanliness in order to let those who had become defiled enter in.”

This can't be done alone. Someone has to be willing to be made unclean on your behalf.

This is the provision of the Lord for his people. The sin offering to purify them and the camp. This is how you prevent the defiling of the Tabernacle.

The journey can progress now. Onward to the promise.

The story of Israel will roll on. They will carry this need with them, the need to be clean before the Lord. But it is about more than them and this camp.

All of this pointing to the human need to be made clean, and God's provision of himself to make it happen.

Perfect

We, like the unclean in this story, find ourselves tainted by the world and our own hearts. We feel it. The wages of sin.

We feel the guilt of it and shame of it.

Brene Brown: “I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it’s holding something we’ve done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

“I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”

Where Brown decides shame is bad and we should stop using it as motivation (which I agree), her advice is simply to stop labeling things in life.

Ignoring, reclassifying it to say it isn’t harmful, suggesting sin isn’t real, all strategies of man to avoid the sense we are unclean.

Rather than fall for these traps, we actually have a place to take our guilt and shame and be made clean.

Where these rites carried Israel to the promise, now in Christ we find our purification in him.

Hebrews 9:13–14 “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, [14] how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (ESV)

The blood of Christ is even more effective in its cleansing power. It truly makes us clean and brings us to life with God.

Lasting. His blood to atone forever. His willingness to be made unclean for us. Giving of himself and taking on our sin as his own to pay its wages.

When we believe in Jesus, that his life was lived for us, that his death took our place, and our new life is found in his resurrection, we hear him speak over us.

John 15:3 “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” (ESV)

This is the power of God for salvation. His grace extended to us, that in repentance forgiveness is found in his name. A sufficient sacrifice to cover all of our sin. Absolution. Being made clean in Jesus.

Given a new way, to come to the well over and over again, applied his finished work for us.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (ESV)

Free from our shame.

“The merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, which are the essence of him, are perpetually preserved for the removal of our daily pollution” Charles Spurgeon

“Some of our sins are deliberate, while others are the result of carelessness and thoughtlessness on our part. Some sin, such as failing to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all our souls as we should, is virtually inevitable due to our weakness as fallen human beings. We are pervasively contaminated people on every level of our beings. Instead of redefining sin so that it no longer covers the things that we do, or pretending that sin doesn't exist in our carefully sheltered world, it is far better to recognize the inevitable reality of our contact with sin and let that realization drive us back to God and to the cleansing he has provided.”

And he freely gives it to us.

Jesus is the answer to the accusation. The way to move beyond the burden of it. To be clean. Because Jesus defeated death, nothing can taint his finished work. No power of hell, no scheme of man.

As the old hymn says, “What though the vile accuser roar
Of sins that I have done;
I know them well, and thousands more;
My God, He knoweth none”

“My sin is cast into the sea
Of God’s forgotten memory
No more to haunt accusingly
For Christ has lived and died for me”

We come and drench ourselves again in this living water. To be made whole. To be sprinkled clean.

There is nothing you’ve done or that has been done to you that outmatches what Jesus has done for you.

Run to Jesus to be clean - Confess your sin, surrender your shame. Hear his declaration of “it is finished” over you.

More than skin deep. To the depths of our souls.

We are clean because of the word he has spoken to us. It is what they would long for in the wilderness. It is what carries us all the way home.

This week I couldn’t help but think of dogs getting a bath. From the gloom of the moment they respond in two essential ways.

They run around, roll on their backs, excited, full of life. And they try to smell like something else again!

In Jesus, we roll around full of life and begin to recognize a new scent. We smell like him.

Made clean in Jesus [period].

That smells good.

Scotty Smith:

“Fear not, for you will not be ashamed; be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced; for you will forget the shame of your youth.” Isa. 54:4 (ESV)

Jesus, we're thankful today for the healing truths of the Scriptures. and the liberating power of the gospel. Especially where shame lingers, doing its dastardly, disintegrating work. Indeed, the elimination of all shame is one of the things we're most looking forward to when you return.

Never again will we feel dis-graced, only fully-graced. Never again will we hide in plain sight, because of the wounds that took our voices, hearts, and dignity. Never again will we feel the contemptuous, paralyzing power of shame. There won't be any desire to cover up, look down, or run away... O, blessed thought... O, glorious freedom.

The Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame."
Rom. 10:11 (ESV)

How can we be certain? Because, on the cross, you bore the full weight of our guilt and shattered the power of our shame. And now, you neither despise our weaknesses nor spurn our brokenness.

You don't turn away from us when we feel fractured or fragile, too self-aware or easily condemned. You've clothed us with the garments of grace and the perfection of your righteousness. We praise you, Jesus, for your tenderness, understanding, and compassion.

Hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Rom. 5:5 (ESV)

Indeed, the promise of a shame-free eternity isn't self-hype, but a sure hope. As we wait for the Day of complete healing, we live in the day of your lavish love and constant delight. May the Spirit's ongoing testimony to our beloved-ness drown out all other grace-less voices and noise. So very Amen we pray, Jesus, in your wonderful, merciful name."