

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 5

In this chapter we have,

I. An order, pursuant to the laws already made, for the removing of the unclean out of the camp, #Nu 5:1-4.

II. A repetition of the laws concerning restitution, in case of wrong done to a neighbour (#Nu 5:5-8), and concerning the appropriating of the hallowed things to the priests, #Nu 5:9,10.

III. A new law made concerning the trial of a wife suspected of adultery, by the waters of jealousy, #Nu 5:11-31.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 10.

Here is,

I. A command for the purifying of the camp, by turning out from within its lines all those that were ceremonially unclean, by issues, leprosies, or the touch of dead bodies, until they were cleansed according to the law, #Nu 5:2,3.

1. These orders are executed immediately, #Nu 5:4.

(1.) The camp was now newly-modelled and put in order, and therefore, to complete the reformation of it, it is next to be cleansed. Note, The purity of the church must be as carefully consulted and preserved as the peace and order of it. It is requisite, not only that every Israelite be confined to his own standard, but that every polluted Israelite be separated from it. *The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable.*

(2.) God's tabernacle was now fixed in the midst of their camp, and therefore they must be careful to keep it clean. Note, The greater profession of religion any house or family make the more they are obliged to put away iniquity far from their tabernacle, #Job 22:23. The person, the place, *in the midst of which God dwells*, must not be defiled; for, if it be, he will be affronted, offended, and provoked to withdraw, #1Co 3:16,17.

2. This expulsion of the unclean out of the camp was to signify,

(1.) What the governors of the church ought to do: they must *separate between the precious and the vile*, and purge out scandalous persons, as old leaven (#1Co 5:8,13), lest others should be infected and defiled, #Heb 12:15. It is for the glory of Christ and the edification of his church that those who are openly and incorrigibly profane and vicious should be put out and kept from Christian communion till they repent.

(2.) What God himself will do in the great day: he will *thoroughly purge his floor*, and *gather out of his kingdom all things that offend*. As here the unclean were shut out of the camp, so into the new Jerusalem *no unclean thing shall enter*, #Re 21:27.

II. A law concerning restitution, in case of wrong done to a neighbour. It is called a *sin that men commit* (#Nu 5:6), because it is common among men; a sin of man, that is, a *sin against man*, so it is thought it should be translated and understood. If a man overreach or defraud his brother in any matter, it is to be looked upon as a trespass against the Lord, who is the protector of right, the punisher of wrong, and who strictly charges and

commands us to do justly. Now what is to be done when a man's awakened conscience charges him with guilt of this kind, and brings it to his remembrance though done long ago?

1. He must *confess his sin*, confess it to God, confess it to his neighbour, and so take shame to himself. If he have denied it before, though it go against the grain to own himself in a lie, yet he must do it; because his heart was hardened he denied it, therefore he has no other way of making it appear that his heart is now softened but by confessing it.
2. He must bring a sacrifice, a *ram of atonement*, #Nu 5:8. Satisfaction must be made for the offence done to God, whose law is broken, as well as for the loss sustained by our neighbour; restitution in this case is not sufficient without faith and repentance.
3. Yet the sacrifices would not be accepted till full amends were made to the party wronged, not only the principal, but a fifth part added to it, #Nu 5:7. It is certain that while that which is got by injustice is knowingly retained in the hands the guilt of the injustice remains upon the conscience, and is not purged by sacrifice nor offering, prayers not tears, for it is one and the same continued act of sin persisted in. This law we had before (#Le 6:4), and it is here added that if the party wronged was dead, and he had no near kinsman who was entitled to the debt, or if it was any way uncertain to whom the restitution should be made, this should not serve for an excuse to detain what was unjustly gotten; to whomsoever it pertained, it was certainly none of his that got it by sin, and therefore it must be given to the priest, #Nu 5:8. If there were any that could make out a title to it, it must not be given to the priest (God hates robbery for burnt-offerings); but, if there were not, then it lapsed to the great Lord (*ob defectum sanguinis--for want of issue*), and the priests were his receivers. Note, Some work of piety or charity is a piece of necessary justice to be done by those who are conscience to themselves that they have done wrong, but know not how otherwise to make restitution; what is not our property will never be our profit.

III. A general rule concerning hallowed things given upon this occasion, that, whatever was given to the priest, *his it shall be*, #Nu 5:9,10.

1. He that gave it was not to receive his gift again upon any pretence whatsoever. This law ratifies and confirms all grants for pious uses, that people might not give things to the priests in a fit of zeal, and then recall them in a fit of vexation.
2. The other priests should not come in sharers with that priest who then officiated, and to whom the hallowed thing, whatever it was, was given. Let him that was most ready and diligent in attending fare the better for it: if he do the work, let him have the pay, and much good may it do him.

Ver. 11. thru Ver. 31.

We have here the law concerning the solemn trial of a wife whose husband was jealous of her. Observe,

I. What was the case supposed: That a man had some reason to suspect his wife to have committed adultery, #Nu 5:12-14. Here,

1. The sin of adultery is justly represented as an exceedingly sinful sin; it is going aside from God and virtue, and the good way, #Pr 2:17. It is committing a trespass against

the husband, robbing him of his honour, alienating his right, introducing a spurious breed into his family to share with his children in his estate, and violating her covenant with him. It is being defiled; for nothing pollutes the mind and conscience more than this sin does.

2. It is supposed to be a sin which great care is taken by the sinners to conceal, which there is no witness of. *The eye of the adulterer waits for the twilight, #Job 24:15.* And the adulteress takes her opportunity when *the good man is not at home, #Pr 7:19.* It would not covet to be secret if it were not shameful; and the devil who draws sinners to this sin teaches them how to cover it.
3. The *spirit of jealousy* is supposed to come upon the husband, of which Solomon says, It is the *rage of a man (#Pr 6:34)*, and that it is *cruel as the grave, #So 8:6.*
4. "Yet" (say the Jewish writers) "he must make it appear that he has some just cause for the suspicion."

The rule they give is,

"If the husband have said unto his wife before witnesses, 'Be not thou in secret with such a man;' and, notwithstanding that admonition, it is afterwards proved that she was in secret with that man, though her father or her brother, then he may compel her to drink the bitter water."

But the law here does not tie him to that particular method of proving the just cause of his suspicion; it might be otherwise proved. In case it could be proved that she had committed adultery, she was to be put to death (*#Le 20:10*); but, if it was uncertain, then this law took place. Hence,

(1.) Let all wives be admonished not to give any the least occasion for the suspicion of their chastity; it is not enough that they abstain from the evil of uncleanness, but they must abstain from all appearance of it, from every thing that looks like it, or leads to it, or may give the least umbrage to jealousy; for *how great a matter may a little fire kindle!*

(2.) Let all husbands be admonished not to entertain any causeless or unjust suspicions of their wives. If charity in general, much more conjugal affection, teaches to *think no evil, #1Co 13:5.* It is the happiness of the virtuous woman that *the heart of her husband does safely trust in her, #Pr 31:11.*

II. What was the course prescribed in this case, that, if the suspected wife was innocent, she might not continue under the reproach and uneasiness of her husband's jealousy, and, if guilty, her sin might find her out, and others might hear, and fear, and take warning.

1. The process of the trial must be thus:--

(1.) Her husband must *bring her to the priest*, with the witnesses that could prove the ground of his suspicion, and desire that she might be put upon her trial. The Jews say that the priest was first to endeavour to persuade her to confess the truth, saying to this purport,

"Dear daughter, perhaps thou wast overtaken by drinking wine, or wast carried away by the heat of youth or the examples of bad neighbours; come, confess the truth, for the sake of his great name which is described in the most sacred ceremony, and do not let it be blotted out with the bitter water."

If she confessed, saying, "I am defiled," she was not put to death, but was divorced and lost her dowry; if she said, "I am pure," then they proceeded.

(2.) He must bring a coarse offering of barley-meal, without oil or frankincense, agreeably to the present afflicted state of his family; for a great affliction it was either to have cause to be jealous or to be jealous without cause. It is an *offering of memorial*, to signify that what was to be done was intended as a religious appeal to the omniscience and justice of God.

(3.) The priest was to prepare the water of jealousy, the holy water out of the laver at which the priests were to wash when they ministered; this must be brought in an *earthen vessel*, containing (they say) about a pint; and it must be an *earthen vessel*, because the coarser and plainer every thing was the more agreeable it was to the occasion. *Dust* must be put into the water, to signify the reproach she lay under, and the shame she ought to take to herself, putting her mouth in the dust; but dust from *the floor of the tabernacle*, to put an honour upon every thing that pertained to the place God had chosen to put his name there, and to keep up in the people a reverence for it; see [#Joh 8:6](#).

(4.) The woman was to be *set before the Lord*, at the east gate of the temple-court (say the Jews), and her head was to be uncovered, in token of her sorrowful condition; and there she stood for a spectacle to the world, that other women might learn not to do *after her lewdness*, [#Eze 23:48](#). Only the Jews say,

"Her own servants were not to be present, that she might not seem vile in their sight, who were to give honour to her; her husband also must be dismissed."

(5.) The priest was to adjure her to tell the truth, and to denounce the curse of God against her if she were guilty, and to declare what would be the effect of her drinking the water of jealousy, [#Nu 5:19-22](#). He must assure her that, if she were innocent, the water would do her no harm, [#Nu 5:19](#). None need fear the curse of the law if they have not broken the commands of the law. But, if she were guilty, this water would be poison to her, it would make her *belly to swell and her thigh to rot*, and she should be a curse or abomination among her people, [#Nu 5:21,22](#). To this she must say, *Amen*, as Israel must do to the curses pronounced on mount Ebal, [#De 27:15-26](#). Some think the *Amen*, being doubled, respects both parts of the adjuration, both that which freed her if innocent and that which condemned her if guilty. No woman, if she were guilty, could say *Amen* to this adjuration, and drink the water upon it, unless she disbelieved the truth of God or defied his justice, and had come to such a pitch of impudence and hard-heartedness in sin as to challenge God Almighty to do his worst, and choose rather to venture upon his curse than to give him glory by making confession; thus has whoredom *taken away the heart*.

(6.) The priest was to write this curse in a scrip or scroll or parchment, *verbatim--word for word*, as he had expressed it, and then to wipe or scrape out what he had written into the water ([#Nu 5:23](#)), to signify that it was that curse which impregnated the water, and gave it its strength to effect what was intended. It signified that, if she were innocent, the curse should be blotted out and never appear against her, as it is written, [#Isa 43:25](#), *I am he that blotteth out thy transgression*, and [#Ps 51:9](#), *Blot out my iniquities*; but that, if she were guilty, the curse, as it was written, being infused into the water, would enter into her bowels with the water, even *like oil into her bones* ([#Ps 109:18](#)), as we read of a curse entering into a house, [#Zec 5:4](#).

(7.) The woman must then drink the water ([#Nu 5:24](#)); it is called *the bitter water*, some think because they put wormwood in it to make it bitter, or rather because it caused the

curse. Thus sin is called *an evil thing and a bitter* for the same reason, because it *causeth the curse*, #Jer 2:19. If she had been guilty (and otherwise it did not cause the curse), she was made to know that though her stolen waters had been sweet, and her *bread eaten in secret pleasant*, yet the end was *bitter as wormwood*, #Pr 9:17; Nu 5:4. Let all that meddle with forbidden pleasures know that they will be bitterness in the latter end. The Jews say that if, upon denouncing the curse, the woman was so terrified that she durst not drink the water, but confessed she was defiled, the priest flung down the water, and cast her offering among the ashes, and she was divorced without dowry: if she confessed not, and yet would not drink, they forced her to it; and, if she was ready to throw it up again, they hastened her away, that she might not pollute the holy place.

(8.) Before she drank the water, the jealousy-offering was waved and offered upon the altar (#Nu 5:25,26); a handful of it was burnt for a memorial, and the remainder of it eaten by the priest, unless the husband was a priest, and then it was scattered among the ashes. This offering in the midst of the transaction signified that the whole was an appeal to God, as a God that knows all things, and *from whom no secret is hid*.

(9.) All things being thus performed according to the law, they were to wait the issue. The water, with a little dust put into it, and the scrapings of a written parchment, had no natural tendency at all to do either good or hurt; but if God was thus appealed to in the way of an instituted ordinance, though otherwise the innocent might have continued under suspicion and the guilty undiscovered, yet God would so far own his own institution as that in a little time, by the miraculous operation of Providence, the innocency of the innocent should be cleared, and the sin of the guilty should find them out.

[1.] If the suspected woman was really guilty, the water she drank would be poison to her (#Nu 5:18), her belly would swell and her thigh rot by a vile disease for vile deserts, and she would *mourn at the last when her flesh and body were consumed*, #Pr 5:11. Bishop Patrick says, from some of the Jewish writers, that the effect of these waters appeared immediately, she grew pale, and her eyes ready to start out of her head. Dr. Lightfoot says that sometimes it appeared not for two or three years, but she bore no children, was sickly, languished, and rotted at last; it is probable that some indications appeared immediately. The rabbins say that the adulterer also died in the same day and hour that the adulteress did, and in the same manner too, that his belly swelled, and his secret parts rotted: a disease perhaps not much unlike that which in these latter ages the avenging hand of a righteous God has made the scourge of uncleanness, and with which whores and whoremongers infect, and plague, and ruin one another, since they escape punishment from men. The Jewish doctors add that the waters had this effect upon the adulteress only in case the husband had never offended in the same kind; but that, if he had at any time defiled the marriage-bed, God did not thus right him against his injurious wife; and that therefore in the latter and degenerate ages of the Jewish church, when uncleanness did abound, this way of trial was generally disused and laid aside; men, knowing their own crimes, were content not to know their wives' crimes. And to this perhaps may refer the threatening (#Ho 4:14), *I will not punish your spouses when they commit adultery, for you yourselves are separated with whores*.

[2.] If she were innocent, the water she drank would be physic to her: *She shall be free, and shall conceive seed*, #Nu 5:28. The Jewish writers magnify the good effects of this water to the innocent woman, that, to recompense her for the wrong done to her by the suspicion, she should, after the drinking of these waters, be stronger and look better than ever; if she was sickly, she should become healthful, should bear a man-child, and have easy labour.

2. From the whole we may learn,

(1.) That secret sins are known to God, and sometimes are strangely brought to light in this life; however, there is a day coming when God will, by Jesus Christ, as here by the priest, judge the *secrets of men according to the gospel*, **#Ro 2:16**.

(2.) That, in particular, *Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge*. The violation of conjugal faith and chastity is highly provoking to the God of heaven, and sooner or later it will be reckoned for. Though we have not now the waters of jealousy to be a sensible terror to the unclean, yet we have a word from God which ought to be as great a terror, that if *any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy*, **#1Co 3:17**.

(3.) That God will find out some way or other to clear the innocency of the innocent, and to bring forth their righteousness as the light.

(4.) That to *the pure all things are pure, but to the defiled nothing is so*, **#Tit 1:15**. The same word is to some a *savour of life unto life, to others a savour of death unto death*, like those waters of jealousy, according as they receive it; the same providence is for good to some and for hurt to others, **#Jer 24:5,8,9**. And, whatsoever it is intended for, it *shall not return void*.