

INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS CHAPTER 19

This chapter is only concerning the preparing and using of the ashes which were to impregnate the water of purification. The people had complained of the strictness of the law, which forbade their near approach to the tabernacle, #Nu 17:13. In answer to this complaint, they are here directed to purify themselves, so as that they might come as far as they had occasion without fear. Here is,

I. The method of preparing these ashes, by the burning of a red heifer, with a great deal of ceremony, #Nu 19:1-10.

II. The way of using them.

1. They were designed to purify persons from the pollution contracted by a dead body, #Nu 19:11-16.
2. They were to be put into running water (a small quantity of them), with which the person to be cleansed must be purified, #Nu 19:17-22. And that this ceremonial purification was a type and figure of the cleansing of the consciences of believers from the pollutions of sin appears by the apostle's discourse, (#Heb 9:13,14), where he compares the efficacy of the blood of Christ with the sanctifying virtue that was in

"the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean."

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 10.

We have here the divine appointment concerning the solemn burning of a red heifer to ashes, and the preserving of the ashes, that of them might be made, not a beautifying, but a purifying, water, for that was the utmost the law reached to; it offered not to adorn as the gospel does, but to cleanse only. This burning of the heifer, though it was not properly a sacrifice of expiation, being not performed at the altar, yet was typical of the death and sufferings of Christ, by which he intended, not only to satisfy God's justice, but to purify and pacify our consciences, that we may have peace with God and also peace in our own bosoms, to prepare for which Christ died, not only like the bulls and goats at the altar, but like the heifer without the camp.

I. There was a great deal of care employed in the choice of the heifer that was to be burnt, much more than in the choice of any other offering, #Nu 19:2. It must not only be without blemish, typifying the spotless purity and sinless perfection of the Lord Jesus, but it must a red heifer, because of the rarity of the colour, that it might be the more remarkable: the Jews say,

"If but two hairs were black or white, it was unlawful."

Christ, as man, was the Son of Adam, *red earth*, and we find him red in his apparel, red with his own blood, and red with the blood of his enemies. And it must be one on which never came yoke, which was not insisted on in other sacrifices, but thus was typified the voluntary offer of the Lord Jesus, when he said, *Lo, I come*, He was bound and held with no other cords than those of his own love. This heifer was to be provided at the expense of the congregation, because they were all to have a joint interest in it; and so all believers have in Christ.

II. There was to be a great deal of ceremony in the burning of it. The care of doing it was committed to Eleazar, not to Aaron himself, because it was not fit that he should do any

thing to render himself ceremonially unclean, no, not so much as *till the evening* (#Nu 19:8); yet it being an affair of great concern especially in the significance of it, it was to be performed by him that was next to Aaron in dignity. The chief priests of that time had the principal hand in the death of Christ. Now,

1. The heifer was to be slain without the camp, as an impure thing, which bespeaks the insufficiency of the methods prescribed by the ceremonial law to take away sin. So far were they from cleansing effectually that they were themselves unclean; as if the pollution that was laid upon them continued to cleave to them. Yet, to answer this type, our Lord Jesus, being made sin and a curse for us, *suffered without the gate*, #Heb 13:12.
2. Eleazar was to *sprinkle the blood directly before the door of the tabernacle*, and looking steadfastly towards it, #Nu 19:4. This made it in some sort an expiation; for the sprinkling of the blood before the Lord was the chief solemnity in all the sacrifices of atonement; therefore, though this was not done at the altar, yet, being done towards the sanctuary, it was intimated that the virtue and validity of it depended upon the sanctuary, and were derived from it. This signified the satisfaction that was made to God by the death of Christ, our great high priest, who *by the eternal Spirit* (and the Spirit is called the finger of God, as Ainsworth observes, #Lu 11:20) *offered himself without spot unto God*; directly before the sanctuary, when he said, *Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit*. It also signifies how necessary it was to the purifying of our hearts that satisfaction should be made to divine justice. This sprinkling of the blood put virtue into the ashes.
3. The heifer was to be *wholly burnt*, #Nu 19:5. This typified the extreme sufferings of our Lord Jesus, both in soul and body, as a sacrifice made by fire. The priest was to cast into the fire, while it was burning, cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet, which were used in the cleansing of lepers (#Le 14:6,7), that the ashes of these might be mingled with the ashes of the heifer, because they were designed for purification.
4. The ashes of the heifer (separated as well as they could from the ashes of the wood wherewith it was burnt) were to be carefully gathered up by the hand of a clean person, and (as the Jews say) pounded and sifted, and so laid up for the use of the congregation, as there was occasion (#Nu 19:9), not only for that generation, but for posterity; for the ashes of this one heifer were sufficient to season as many vessels of water as the people of Israel would need for many ages. The Jews say that this one served till the captivity, nearly 1000 years, and that there was never another heifer burnt till Ezra's time, after their return, to which tradition of theirs, grounded (I suppose) only upon the silence of their old records, I see no reason we have to give credit, since in the later times of their church, of which they had more full records, they find eight burnt between Ezra's time and the destruction of the second temple, which was about 500 years, These ashes are said to be laid up here as a *purification for sin*, because, though they were intended to purify only from ceremonial uncleanness, yet they were a type of that purification for sin which our Lord Jesus made by his death. Ashes mixed with water are used in scouring, but these had their virtue purely from the divine institution, and their accomplishment and perfection in Christ, who is *the end of this law for righteousness*. Now observe,

(1.) That the water of purification was made so by the ashes of a heifer, whose blood was sprinkled before the sanctuary; so that which cleanses our consciences is the abiding virtue of the death of Christ; it is his blood that *cleanses from all sin*, #1Jo 1:7.

(2.) That the ashes were sufficient for all the people. There needed not to be a fresh

heifer slain for every person or family that had occasion to be purified, but this one was enough for all, even for the strangers that sojourned among them (#Nu 19:10); so there is virtue enough in the blood of Christ for all that repent and believe the gospel, for every Israelite, and not for their sins only, but for *the sins of the whole world*, #1Jo 2:2.

(3.) That these ashes were capable of being preserved without waste to many ages. No bodily substance is so incorruptible as ashes are, which (says bishop Patrick) made these a very fit emblem of the everlasting efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ. He is able to save, and, in order to that, able to cleanse, to the uttermost, both of person and times.

(4.) These ashes were laid up as a stock or treasure, for the constant purification of Israel from their pollutions; so the blood of Christ is laid up for us in the word and sacraments, as an inexhaustible fountain of merit, to which by faith we may have recourse daily for the purging of our consciences; see #Zec 13:1.

5. All those that were employed in this service were made ceremonially unclean by it; even Eleazar himself, though he did but sprinkle the blood, #Nu 19:7. He that *burned the heifer was unclean* (#Nu 19:8), and he that *gathered up the ashes* (#Nu 19:10); so all that had a hand in putting Christ to death contracted guilt by it: his betrayer, his prosecutors, his judge, his executioner, all did what they did with wicked hands, though it was *by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God* (#Ac 2:23); yet some of them were, and all might have been cleansed by the virtue of that same blood which they had brought themselves under the guilt of. Some make this to signify the imperfection of the legal services, and their insufficiency to take away sin, inasmuch as those who prepared for the purifying of others were themselves polluted by the preparation. The Jews say, This is a mystery which Solomon himself did not understand, that the same thing should pollute those that were clean and purify those that were unclean. But (says bishop Patrick) it is not strange to those who consider that all the sacrifices which were offered for sin were therefore looked upon as impure, because the sins of men were laid upon them, as all our sins were upon Christ, who therefore is said to be *made sin for us*, #2Co 5:21.

Ver. 11. thru Ver. 22.

Directions are here given concerning the use and application of the ashes which were prepared for purification. they were laid up to be laid out; and therefore, though now one place would serve to keep them in, while all Israel lay so closely encamped, yet it is probable that afterwards, when they came to Canaan, some of these ashes were kept in every town, for there would be daily use for them. Observe,

I. In what cases there needed a purification with these ashes. No other is mentioned here than the ceremonial uncleanness that was contracted by the touch of a dead body, or of the bone or grave of a dead man, or being in the tent or house where a dead body lay, #Nu 19:11,14-16. This I look upon to have been one of the greatest burdens of the ceremonial law, and one of the most unaccountable. He that touched the carcase of an unclean beast, or any living man under the greatest ceremonial uncleanness, was made unclean by it only *till the evening*, and needed only common water to purify himself with; but he that came near the dead body of man, woman, or child, must bear the reproach of his uncleanness seven days, must twice be purified with the water of separation, which he could not obtain without trouble and charge, and till he was purified must not come near the sanctuary upon pain of death.

1. This was strange, considering,

(1.) That whenever any died (and we are in deaths off) several persons must unavoidable contract this pollution, the body must be stripped, washed, wound up, carried out, and buried, and this could not be done without many hands, and yet all defiled, which signifies that in our corrupt and fallen state there is none that lives and sins not; we cannot avoid being polluted by the defiling world we pass through, and we offend daily, yet the impossibility of our being sinless does not make sin the less polluting.

(2.) That taking care of the dead, to see them decently buried, is not only necessary, but a very good office, and an act of kindness, both to the honour of the dead and the comfort of the living, and yet uncleanness was contracted by it, which intimates that the pollutions of sin mix with and cleave to our best services. *There is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not*; we are apt some way or other to do amiss even in our doing good.

(3.) That this pollution was contracted by what was done privately in their own houses, which intimates (as bishop Patrick observes) that God sees what is done in secret, and nothing can be concealed from the divine Majesty.

(4.) This pollution might be contracted, and yet a man might never know it, as by the touch of a grave which appeared not, of which our Saviour says, Those that *walk over it are not aware of it (#Lu 11:44)*, which intimates the defilement of the conscience by sins of ignorance, and the cause we have to cry out,

"Who can understand his errors?" and to pray, "Cleanse us from secret faults, faults which we ourselves do not see ourselves guilty of."

2. But why did the law make a dead corpse such a defiling thing?

(1.) Because death is the *wages of sin, entered into the world* by it, and reigns by the power of it. Death to mankind is another thing from what it is to other creatures: it is a curse, it is the execution of the law, and therefore the defilement of death signifies the defilement of sin.

(2.) Because the law could not conquer death, nor abolish it and alter the property of it, as the gospel does by bringing life and immortality to light, and so introducing a better hope. Since our Redeemer was dead and buried, death is no more destroying to the Israel of God, and therefore dead bodies are no more defiling; but while the church was under the law, to show that it *made not the comers thereunto perfect*, the pollution contracted by dead bodies could not but form in their minds melancholy and uncomfortable notions concerning death, while believers now through Christ can triumph over it. *O grave! where is thy victory? Where is thy pollution?*

II. How the ashes were to be used and applied in these cases.

1. A small quantity of the ashes must be put into a cup of spring water, and mixed with the water, which thereby was made, as it is here called, a *water of separation*, because it was to be sprinkled on those who were separated or removed from the sanctuary by their uncleanness. As the ashes of the heifer signified the merit of Christ, so the running water signified the power and grace of the blessed Spirit, who is compared to rivers of living water; and it is by his operation that the righteousness of Christ is applied to us for our cleansing. Hence we are said to be washed, that is, sanctified and justified, not only in the name of the Lord Jesus, but by the *Spirit of our God, #1Co 6:11; 1Pe 1:2*. Those that promise themselves benefit by the righteousness of Christ, while they submit not to the grace and influence of the Spirit, do but deceive themselves, for we cannot put asunder what God has joined, nor be

purified by the ashes otherwise than in the running water.

2. This water must be applied by a bunch of hyssop dipped in it, with which the person or thing to be cleansed must be sprinkled (**#Nu 19:18**), in allusion to which David prays, *Purge me with hyssop*. Faith is the bunch of hyssop wherewith the conscience is sprinkled and the heart purified. Many might be sprinkled at once, and the water with which the ashes were mingled might serve for many sprinklings, till it was all spent; and a very little lighting upon a man served to purify him, if done with that intention. In allusion to this application of the water of separation by sprinkling, the blood of Christ is said to be the *blood of sprinkling* (**#Heb 12:24**), and with it were are said to be *sprinkled from an evil conscience* (**#Heb 10:22**), that is, we are freed from the uneasiness that arises from a sense of our guilt. And it is foretold that Christ, by his baptism, shall *sprinkle many nations*, **#Isa 52:15**.
3. The unclean person must be sprinkled with this water on *the third day* after his pollution, and *on the seventh day*, **#Nu 19:12-19**. The days were reckoned (we may suppose) from the last time of his touching or coming near the dead body; for he would not begin the days of his cleansing while he was still under a necessity of repeating the pollution; but when the dead body was buried, so that there was no further occasion of meddling with it, then he began to reckon his days. Then, and then only, we may with comfort apply Christ's merit to our souls, when we have forsaken sin, and cease all *fellowship with the unfruitful works of death and darkness*. The repetition of the sprinkling teaches us often to renew the actings of repentance and faith, wash as Naaman, *seven times*; we need to do that often which is so necessary to be well done.
4. Though the pollution contracted was only ceremonial, yet the neglect of the purification prescribed would turn into moral guilt: *He that shall be unclean, and shall not purify himself, that soul shall be cut off*, **#Nu 19:20**. Note, It is a dangerous thing to contemn divine institutions, though they may seem minute. A slight wound, if neglected, may prove fatal; a sin we call little, if not repented of, will be our ruin, when great sinners that repent shall find mercy. Our uncleanness separates us from God, but it is our being unclean and not purifying ourselves that will separate us for ever from him: it is not the wound that is fatal, so much as the contempt of the remedy.
5. Even he that *sprinkled the water of separation, or touched it, or touched the unclean person, must be unclean till the evening*, that is, must not come near the sanctuary on that day, **#Nu 19:21,22**. Thus God would show them the imperfection of those services, and their insufficiency to purify the conscience, that they might look for the Messiah, who in the fulness of time should by the eternal Spirit offer himself without spot unto God, and so *purge our consciences from dead works* (that is, from sin, which defiles like a dead body, and is therefore called a *body of death*), that we may have liberty of access to the sanctuary, to serve the living God with living sacrifices.