

THE TROUBLE WITH NATURE

by Ray C. Stedman

We are dealing in the book of Leviticus with the great symbolic pictures of what God has provided for us in Jesus Christ and of how to live life and to face trials and problems and dangers and difficulties, and solve them -- all taught to us in these wonderful shadows and types of the Old Testament. Today we come to the fifteenth chapter, and perhaps some of you have been afraid of what we run into here.

The other day I greeted one of the leading men in our church and said, "Hello, how are you?" He said, "I'm fine, but a little fearful." I said, "Fearful of what?" And he said, "I am a little afraid of what you are going to do when you come to the fifteenth chapter of Leviticus."

In this chapter we have reference to certain bodily functions, especially discharges from the body, which many feel are so personal and intimate that it is not proper to read this in public nor to refer to it openly. But my answer to that is: "If this chapter should not be read then it should never have been written."

We are assured in the book of Proverbs that "every word of God is pure" {Prov 30:5 KJV}, is clean, and there is nothing immoral or wrong about any portion of Scripture. If the Holy Spirit can be charged with poor taste, then what in the world is the measure of good taste? Our problem is that our attitudes need to be corrected. The Word of God ought to judge and correct us, and not we it. It is our outlook of prudishness and oversensitivity that is wrong. The Bible looks at the human body with a wonderful frankness. It is never vulgar, never obscene, never descends to toilet-talk, but neither is it squeamish or priggish. It simply treats these subjects as they ought to be treated.

These bodily functions are absolutely essential to our lives, and there is nothing wrong with them. Like many of you, I was raised under the Victorian ethic which assumed that the human body ended at the waist and that nothing below that was ever to be mentioned. Now, of course, we have swung so far in the opposite direction that it might appear that there is nothing above the waist! But I genuinely feel that the swing to an extreme of permissiveness in sexual matters which we see so much abroad today is a direct result of the extreme which already prevailed of Victorian prudery toward the body and especially toward sex. God made sex and he likes it. He designed it and so there is nothing wrong with it nor is there anything wrong in discussing it. But oftentimes the way we have been raised makes us overly sensitive in this area. So it is necessary that we correct this attitude and see ourselves as needing to be changed.

When this chapter speaks as it does of menstruation, of seminal emissions, of the normal discharges of elimination, there is no need for us to blush, to squirm, or to feel embarrassed. If we do, it is a sign that we need to adjust to reality.

With that as an introduction, let's examine this chapter where certain normal and even unavoidable discharges from the body are dealt with -- first those concerning men, in Verses 1-18, then those concerning women, in Verses 19-30, and finally a short summarization.

This chapter, dealing as it does with such open frankness about these matters, always reminds me of an incident which took place when I was being discharged from the United States Navy at the end of World War II. In common with thousands of others who were leaving the services at that time I had to undergo a physical examination. Any of you who have been subjected to this know that it is always done en masse. Two or three hundred young men like myself were stripped absolutely naked and we were all standing in line in a room where we had to endure a very intimate and thorough examination. At one point which was particularly embarrassing, the young man standing next to me in all his natal glory -- I don't know who he was -- looked over at me and said, "You know, I just can't get over how many things the United States Navy is interested in!" I feel very much like that about this chapter.

You can't read the book of Leviticus without seeing how intimately God is concerned with his people. He is deeply concerned about every minor and trivial detail of their lives. He regulates their food, their clothing, their activities, their treatment of diseases. He gives counsel and advice on every matter of life. If you are one of those people who suspect that God is so great and distant and remote from us that he cannot be concerned with you, {then} you have only to read a passage like this to see how intimately, deeply and compassionately he is concerned. No wonder the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, "Even the very hairs of your head are numbered. You are of much more value to God than many sparrows," {cf, Matt 10:30-31, Luke 12:7}. Everything about us is of great concern to our heavenly Father. So it was with his ancient people and so it is with us today.

As we look at these various discharges and see what they meant in terms of the physical lives of God's people then, we need also to see what they mean to us on the level of our spiritual development now.

The first problem concerns discharges associated with certain diseases:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Say to the people of Israel, When any man has a discharge from his body, his discharge is unclean. And this is the law of his uncleanness for a discharge. whether his body runs with his discharge, or his body is stopped from discharge, it is uncleanness in him." {Lev 15:1-3 RSV}

As you pass through life you unavoidably pick up certain infections which create bodily discharges like diarrhea and runny noses. God is concerned for his people about these. So for these kinds of discharges a very strict quarantine was imposed upon them, Verses 4-12:

"Every bed on which he who has the discharge lies shall be unclean; and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. And any one who touches his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until evening. And whoever sits on anything on which he who has the discharge has sat shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. And whoever touches the body of him who has the discharge shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. And if he who has the discharge spits on one who is clean, then he shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. And any saddle on which he who has the discharge rides shall be unclean. And whoever touches anything that was under him shall be unclean until the evening; and he who carries such a thing shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. Any one whom he that has the discharge touches without having rinsed his hands in water shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening. And the earthen vessel which he who has the discharge touches shall be broken; and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water." {Lev 15:4-12 RSV}

The amazing thing about that passage is that it describes the exact procedure used today in modern hospital to prevent the spread of infectious and contagious diseases -- yet anticipated in this ancient book written some 1700 or 1800 years before Christ, long centuries and centuries before modern science discovered anything about bacteria and viruses and the need for sanitary precautions. All these practices were imposed upon God's people by their heavenly Father in order to prevent among them the diseases which were rampant in the ancient world. Remember that God promised them when they came out of Egypt, "If you will walk in my ways, I will put none of these diseases upon you that were in Egypt," {cf, Exod 15:26}. This is the way he fulfilled that promise. He quarantined them. He taught them how to deal with infections and contagions. And there is no question but that these restrictions and regulations saved the nation Israel from many dangerous plagues which were decimating the pagan populations around them. Perhaps this is one of the major reasons that Israel has been preserved as a nation through all these centuries.

Once a person was cleansed, once these discharges stopped running, then the individual was to offer an offering, as we have seen in many earlier instances, Verses 13-15:

"And when he who has a discharge is cleansed of his discharge, then he shall count for himself seven days for his cleansing, and wash his clothes; and he shall bathe his body in running water, and shall be clean. And on the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons, and come before the Lord to the door of the tent of meeting, and

give them to the priest; and the priest shall offer them, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him before the Lord for his discharge." {Lev 15:13-15 RSV}

It is evident that the unavoidable diseases, afflictions, and discharges mentioned here are of a much less serious nature than the leprosy with which we have been dealing in previous chapters. You remember that when the leper was cleansed he had to go through a much more rigorous ceremony which included several offerings. But here the very simplest of the offerings is prescribed -- two turtledoves or two young pigeons: one for a sin offering, one for a burnt offering -- the cheapest, the most available of the offerings. Yet God never once sets aside the requirement for the blood of an innocent substitute to be shed in the place of one who is defiled for any reason whatsoever. By this means he underscores the great fact that human nature needs to be dealt with by blood, by life poured out. It is a deep and complicated problem. It cannot be solved by a mere rearrangement of surface symptoms. God is constantly underscoring that for us in these offerings.

There was a second type of discharge which was concerned with sexuality, Verses 16-18:

"And if a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water, and be unclean until the evening. And every garment and every skin on which the semen comes shall be washed with water, and be unclean until the evening. If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until the evening." {Lev 15:16-18 RSV}

Here we are dealing with married sex. It would be a great mistake to judge from this passage that the Bible suggests in any way that sex in marriage is immoral or wrong. This is simply God's reminder of the pollution of nature, of the fact that the nature of humanity is fallen and that man cannot solve his problems himself. He desperately needs a Savior. And he passes on to his children the same fallen, twisted nature and propensities which he himself is born with.

We who are parents know how this has proved true. When our children were born we looked at them in their innocence and felt deeply within ourselves, "I can teach this child how to avoid all the mistakes that I have made. I can pass on the wisdom which I have accumulated through the years. If I watch very carefully I can teach him how to live and how to avoid having to go through what I am going through."

Yet it never works out that way because, though we can help them in certain ways and give them counsel and guidance, nevertheless they will have to make some of the same mistakes that we made. Their nature is just as twisted and they will be just as blind to counsel from their elders as we were at their age. They will pay no more attention to good moral precepts and standards than we did. They will go right ahead and make the same blunders even though they are warned in advance. Even though they recognize that what they are going to do is wrong they will still do it. Life is continually confirming this great fundamental fact which the Scriptures set before us -- that there is something wrong with nature.

So all that God is doing here when he says that the act of sex results in an uncleanness until evening is simply reminding us that man is a fallen creature and that he must deal with that problem realistically. He can't avoid it. There is no way that he can eliminate it himself. God must handle it, and God has handled it. There is only one way it can be handled -- the redemptive intervention of God -- and if it isn't handled that way there is no escape from the defilement and the destruction of humanity which will follow. So God reminds us that even in the act of sex which results in conception there is a fallen nature involved.

In Verses 19-30 there is a very similar passage dealing with women. We won't take time to read it because you can do that yourself. It deals with the normal, natural monthly menstrual flow of women and, in Verses 25 and following, with abnormalities which would be caused by diseases. Again, there is no implication here that there is anything morally wrong about this function.

But the symbolic significance is the same and in each case the treatment is exactly the same -- washing, being unclean until evening, and the offering of a sacrifice of blood which would cleanse and thus take away the defilement involved.

In reading a chapter like this we can recognize its intense value on the physical level to prevent the contagion of infectious diseases. But it has primary significance on the level of the spiritual. This is why these pictures in the Old Testament are given to us. We are reminded of that in Romans 15 where the Apostle says, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our instruction, that we might learn thereby," {cf, Rom 15:4 KJV}. As you lift this passage to the spiritual level you find very many practical and helpful suggestions.

We don't have to guess at what the spiritual applications are. Our Lord himself made them for us, as recorded in the seventh chapter of Mark. He said, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him," {Mark 7:14b-15a RSV}. Nothing you eat or drink, can defile you, ceremonially and morally. Mark adds this parenthesis in Verse 19: "(Thus he declared all foods clean.)" There are no unclean foods. There may be dangerous food, even poisonous food, but it is not unclean in this moral sense. Then Jesus went on to say, "What comes out of a man is what defiles him," {Mark 7:20}. The truly dangerous discharges are not from the physical life, you see, but from the moral life. "For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man," {Mark 7:21-22 RSV}. Here our Lord lifts this from the physical level to the level of the Spirit, on which we are to live. He says that it is these things which defile the human spirit, the tabernacle in which the Spirit of God has taken up residence. You will notice that many of them are unavoidable. There are certain evils that he lists there which are obvious and blatant and which can be avoided even by those without Christ. Murder and adultery and some of the other more open sins can be avoided by many people. But he also lists many which cannot be avoided, which will be found in us from time to time, whether we like it or not, even as Christians. Even in the most devoted and the most spiritual-minded of believers these things are sometimes present. Devious words which leave a wrong impression, thoughtless actions, foolish, prideful ways, hurtful, sharp responses -- these come without our thinking sometimes. They come without planning, unpremeditatedly. And they represent the fact that the evil, fallen nature -- even though we are believers and have a new relationship with Christ -- is still there and is so subtle, so close to us, so silken that it slips out sometimes without our being aware.

The other day I said something in a jocular fashion to a young man who was telling me a story. I didn't mean anything offensive by it; I was just joking. But I learned later that he was very grievously wounded. And I had to take action to restore our relationship which had been broken. I hadn't meant to offend. But you know how sometimes we can say something to an individual and the tone of our voice will convey something quite different from what the words mean.

Many marital arguments have gone on for hours over: "Well, yes, that is what you said, but what you meant by your tone was entirely different." We try to justify ourselves: "All I said was..." "Yes, but how did you say it?" Thus offenses can occur, defiling, injurious, hurtful relationships can ensue. And these discharges from life come all the time -- especially when the passions are aroused, as in anger or sex. It is these discharges from within that defile. Jesus said so.

What are we to do about them? Are we merely to ignore them? Are we to go on our way and think nothing more of them? No. If we do, we are in trouble. They will add up against us. They will start stacking up in our subconscious. Guilt will begin to increase, and restlessness will come into our spirits. We will find a coolness, a coldness coming in and invariably we will begin to lose out on the warmth and the fire and the love of life because of defilement of the sanctuary, the tabernacle in which we dwell.

So God has provided a way, a remedy. Notice what it is in the passages we have read. First, a person who is defiled shall bathe. As we have already seen, washing is always a picture of the action of the Word of God. The person's defiling thought, his statement, his tone of voice, his attitude of heart, he shall take to the Word and see what the Word has to say about it. The washing of the Word is the beginning of cleansing.

And then he shall be "unclean until the evening." What does this mean? We have seen this phrase all through Leviticus and need to know what it conforms to in our own spiritual experience. There are two degrees of rejection described in the Old Testament. First, the people of Israel could become unclean. Or second, they

could be cut off from their people, called an abomination before the Lord. These are two degrees:

Uncleanness is what we call being "out of fellowship." It means to revert somehow for the moment from rest and dependence upon the Spirit of God to a momentary manifestation of the flesh, the old life, the old nature. There is a break in communion with the Spirit of God so that the flow of the life of Christ in the believer is temporarily arrested. Although Christ doesn't forsake him for one moment, nevertheless, there is, for the moment, no enjoyment of his life. That is to be unclean.

To be *cut off from the people* corresponds to what in the New Testament is called "apostasy". It means to come to the point where we are set aside, "delivered unto Satan," Paul says {1 Tim 1:20, 1 Cor 5:5 KJV}, "for the destruction of the flesh." This is much more serious. It can result ultimately, if it continues long enough, in a complete turning of the back on the faith. But mere uncleanness is much less serious than that, but it is to go on until evening.

This is instructive for us because among the Hebrews the day began at sunset. So the idea is that uncleanness continued until a new beginning, until the sun set and a new day arose. The counterpart of that in the spiritual life is the moment when we repudiate this fleshly manifestation and return to a position of trust in God and we walk again in the Spirit. Thus a new day begins. Whenever we rely upon the Spirit of God it is a new creation, a new beginning, a new day. The Spirit is the Lord of creation and so to be restored to fellowship with him is a new beginning.

Therefore this is a beautiful picture of what is to happen in our spiritual life when we become aware of having said something harsh or thoughtless or critical or unkind. We are to repent, to change our mind, to stop defending it and making excuses for it. We are to repudiate that old nature and immediately turn to the Lord and say, "Lord, thank you for your forgiving grace, and for your love which now picks me up and restores me to where I was before. Let's walk on together." That is a new beginning. Unless you do that you remain unclean. And that is how defilement gradually comes into the spirit of man and defiles the sanctuary in which God dwells. That is when coldness sets in and warmth disappears and we become fretful and restless and unhappy. We have all had this experience, haven't we? We know how it works. But here God is teaching us how to handle it.

The third element in the cleansing is the offering of blood. All through this book you find that God's cleansing agents are always water and blood. In his first letter John says that Jesus came to us by water and by blood {cf, 1 Jn 5:6}. He came to cleanse us in this two-fold way.

The blood, of course, speaks of the death of Jesus on our behalf, which frees God to love us without any restraint whatsoever. The blood is what God really sees. The blood of the innocent Substitute pays our guilt for us in our place and thus God is vindicated in his justice. God has poured out upon Another all the horrible wrath which he has in his holy nature against sin, so that the world can see that God means it when he says he hates sin. But once that happened, he was then free to forgive -- freely, completely, wholly, without any reservation whatsoever -- and to let his love flow out to us. That is what the blood always speaks of. It isn't easy for God to forgive. He is a just God. He is not only loving but he is also just. And his love is restrained by his justice until something occurs which can free him. This is what the blood always does. And our recognition of the fact that Christ has borne that penalty for us is the application to our lives of the offering of the blood. This is the means by which God is able to accomplish our restoration.

But the water, again, represents the Word, and the water is meant for us. It cleanses our conscience. You can say, "Yes, God has forgiven me." But what many people do is to go on and not forgive themselves. They don't allow their conscience to be cleansed. But when we read in the Word of God that he has washed away our sins { cf, Acts 22:16} and has forgiven us all unrighteousness {cf, 1 Jn 1:9}-- if we believe that Word -- then our own conscience is clear, and we are cleansed by the Word. How often have you quoted I 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." And you have said to yourself, "If God said that then he must mean it. Therefore there is no reason for me to be beating myself on the back about this sin any longer. God has cleansed me. I am not dirty nor defiled any longer. I am clean." And you are free to go on with your conscience clear once again. That is the effect of the water.

The water and the blood together cleanse the conscience and free us from guilt before the justice of God.

All of this, you will notice, is in order to keep us from defilement, Verse 31:

"Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst." {Lev 15:31 RSV}

How careful God is to insure that we walk in a way which will allow him to pour out to us the fullness of his glory, joy, and peace! And if we don't experience these it is oftentimes because we allow defilement -- these unavoidable issues of our life -- to come in and remain uncleansed. We didn't intend to do them. We didn't deliberately commit them. But there they are nevertheless. And they must be cleansed! We are to deal with them and handle them in this way which God has prescribed. When we do then we have a sense of untroubled peace and joy.

Perhaps this will help you. I know that many people struggle at this point. Young Christians especially are often unaware of why they start out their new lives with a joyful experience but after awhile it all seems to pall. Many times it is because they have not learned how to deal with these unavoidable discharges of life, these aggravating things that they say and do which are hurtful and injurious to others. But when they do learn to apply God's remedy then the sanctuary is cleansed and the Spirit of God is free to release to them all the warmth of the light and life of a loving Savior.

How practical these matters are!

How much they can help us as we walk through life together!

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your deep and penetrating concern and compassion for us. We are defiled from day to day as we walk through life. We do need the cleansing of your Word, the purifying of your blood. We thank you that it is available to us and we pray that we will be honest about these matters and will not merely let them go unattended. How they can sneak up on us and defile us, Lord, when we are not aware! But help us to keep short accounts with you and to walk honestly before you and let your Holy Spirit cleanse away all the defilement of our lives so that we may be gracious and honest, open and loving, and careful of one another. We ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, our great Substitute, who gave himself for us so that this might be true, Amen.

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