

### The Red Heifer Sacrifice

#### Numbers 19

**Numbers 19** - *"Now the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, <sup>2</sup> 'This is the ordinance of the law which the LORD has commanded, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which a yoke has never come. <sup>3</sup> You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may take it outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him; <sup>4</sup> and Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of the tabernacle of meeting. <sup>5</sup> Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned. <sup>6</sup> And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet, and cast them into the midst of the fire burning the heifer. <sup>7</sup> Then the priest shall wash his clothes, he shall bathe in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp; the priest shall be unclean until evening. <sup>8</sup> And the one who burns it shall wash his clothes in water, bathe in water, and shall be unclean until evening. <sup>9</sup> Then a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and store them outside the camp in a clean place; and they shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for the water of purification it is for purifying from sin. <sup>10</sup> And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes, and be unclean until evening. It shall be a statute forever to the children of Israel and to the stranger who dwells among them.*

*<sup>11</sup> 'He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. <sup>12</sup> He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean. <sup>13</sup> Whoever touches the body of anyone who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD. That person shall be cut off from Israel. He shall be unclean, because the water of purification was not sprinkled on him; his uncleanness is still on him.*

*<sup>14</sup> 'This is the law when a man dies in a tent: All who come into the tent and all who are in the tent shall be unclean seven days; <sup>15</sup> and every open vessel, which has no cover fastened on it, is unclean. <sup>16</sup> Whoever in the open field touches one who is slain by a sword or who has died, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days.*

*<sup>17</sup> 'And for an unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the heifer burnt for purification from sin, and running water shall be put on them in a vessel. <sup>18</sup> A clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, sprinkle it on the tent, on all the vessels, on the persons who were there, or on the one who touched a bone, the slain, the dead, or a grave. <sup>19</sup> The clean person shall sprinkle the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify himself, wash his clothes, and bathe in water; and at evening he shall be clean.*

*<sup>20</sup> 'But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself, that person shall be cut off from among the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD. The water of purification has not been sprinkled on him; he is unclean.*

*<sup>21</sup> It shall be a perpetual statute for them. He who sprinkles the water of purification shall wash his clothes; and he who touches the water of purification shall be unclean until evening. <sup>22</sup> Whatever the unclean person touches shall be unclean; and the person who touches it shall be unclean until evening.”*

## **Background Notes**

What is a “red heifer”? A heifer is a young female cow - not a calf, but young. A red heifer is a young cow with reddish-brown hair. They are rare, but they do exist. Hebrew tradition says that the ashes of the first red heifer sacrifice were used until the Babylonian captivity. If that is correct, the ashes lasted for 1,000 years.

Some of today’s prophetic literature states that the sacrificial system associated with the future rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem can’t begin again until the lost ashes of the red heifer and the lost Ark of the Covenant are found. This speculation may be based on one school of thought within Judaism today, but there is absolutely nothing in the Bible that says the ashes of the red heifer or the Ark of the Covenant must be found before the sacrificial system can begin again in a new Temple in Israel. The Bible is clear that there will be a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem in the future, but the necessity of finding the Ark of the Covenant or ashes of the red heifer is pure speculation. It may happen, but it’s not prophesied in the Bible.

What about the stories that red heifers for the “Third Temple” are being raised in northern Israel today? Well, these stories may be true, but I have yet to talk to anyone who has seen any completely unblemished red heifer first-hand. The “Temple Institute” in Jerusalem is preparing furnishings for the “Third Temple.” I have seen the Temple furnishings, clothing for the priests, and implements to be used for a re-instituted sacrificial system - but no red heifer. However, I don’t doubt that, when the time comes, Judaism will come up with an unblemished red heifer!

## **Doctrinal Points**

### **1. The red heifer sacrifice purified the unclean people in Israel.**

In the book of Leviticus, where we read about all the different sacrifices, there is no mention of the red heifer sacrifice. However, in Numbers 19:9 & 17, the phrase translated “purification from sin” is literally “sin offering” in the Hebrew language. So the red heifer sacrifice was a sin offering, even though typical sacrificial language is not used here, and no altar was involved in this sacrifice. This sacrifice and the ritual associated with it provided cleansing for anyone who was defiled and ceremonially unclean because of contact anything unclean, such as contact with a dead body. Remember, a lot of people died in the 40 years in the wilderness.

In the red heifer sacrifice, the heifer was killed and burned outside the camp. The ashes of the heifer were kept in a container in a clean place outside the camp. When anyone or anything in the camp was unclean, some of the ashes were

put in a vessel and mixed with running water. This water was then sprinkled on the unclean person or object. All the details of this ritual are highly symbolic, as we will see.

Notice how God built sanitary measures into these regulations. The people of that day were not aware of bacteria, viruses or contagion, or the importance of hand-washing, or the concept of quarantine, etc. But notice how all these important health areas are covered in the regulations, and protected God's people from contagious diseases. Even the matter of uncovered vessels (v15), and the importance of being quarantined for seven days (v11, 19), and letting washed clothes dry before wearing them again (v19, 21) were all included in God's protective regulations. And these were important! A person who refused to obey God in these regulations was cut off from Israel (v13, 20) - that is, put to death or banished!

I think that you can already see the overall spiritual lesson in this chapter. God is holy, and those things that are unclean and defiled must be judged. In His grace, however, God provided a way of purification. The red heifer sacrifice purified the unclean people in Israel.

## **2. The red heifer sacrifice pictures the cleansing work of Christ.**

It doesn't take much biblical insight to realize that the red heifer sacrifice is a picture or foreshadowing of Christ as the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The red heifer had to be without blemish and without defect, and on which a yoke had never been placed (v1). As the perfect Sacrifice for sin, our Lord was sinless and pure. No yoke of discipline or restraint ever had to be placed on this perfect Person. He always did the will of God.

As the red heifer was killed outside the camp (v3), so our Lord was crucified outside the city walls of Jerusalem, and outside the "camp" of Judaism. Hebrews 13:11-12 says, *"For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate."* The blood of the slain heifer was sprinkled toward the Tabernacle seven times (v4). This fact certainly emphasizes the perfect and complete work of Christ on the cross. However, the spiritual meaning of the cedar wood and hyssop and the scarlet material that were added to the burning sacrifice is hard to determine.

The pictured meaning of the red heifer sacrifice is summed up in Hebrews 9:13-14: *"For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"*

1 John 1 tells us, *"if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin"*(v7). And *"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and*

*to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”(v9).* This constant cleansing from the defiling effects of sin in our lives is pictured in the sprinkling of the water containing the ashes of the red heifer sacrifice.

The running water mixed with the ashes (v17) is a picture of the Holy Spirit applying the work of Christ to our souls through the Word of God. This takes place as we read and hear Scripture. Ephesians 5:26 says that Christ sanctifies His Church, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word.

This cleansing is vital for close fellowship with the Lord. Our sins are eternally forgiven when we become Christians, but we need constant cleansing from the defiling effects of sin in our everyday walk in this world. Even watching the news on TV can be defiling! 2 Corinthians 7:1 says, “...*let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God...*” The red heifer sacrifice pictures the cleansing work of Christ.

## Practical Application

### Be extremely careful when you “sprinkle the ashes”!

Any ceremonially clean person (not just a priest, but **any** clean person) could sprinkle the ashes of the red heifer sacrifice on an unclean person (v19). In fact, it was the responsibility of clean persons to do so. The ashes were readily available at all times. But in administering the sacred water and ashes to the unclean person, the clean person himself became unclean until the evening (v21).

There's a spiritual application here for us as believers. We can't come into contact with sin without being affected in some way. Even though we have a responsibility and duty to help our brothers and sisters deal with the defiling effects of sin in their lives by applying the cleansing water of God's Word, we must be extremely careful. Galatians 6:1 warns us, “...*if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.*”

A Christian I know became involved in the sin of pornography when he was trying to help another Christian who had fallen in this area. So be very careful when you are called upon to help restore a believer who has become entangled in sin.

**No one** is immune from the defiling effects of contact with sin.

Be extremely careful when you “sprinkle the ashes”!