

Leviticus Bible Study #14

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 12:1-8

1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. **3** And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. **4** Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. **5** But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.

6 “And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, **7** and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. **8** And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

Introduction

The laws concerning cleanliness began with food. People typically eat every day, so a proper ceremonial diet is a priority. Before tackling other matters, the children of Israel are taught to proclaim to their Gentile neighbors, “we eat at God's table.” Another common aspect of daily life is procreation; for all of humanity's faults, the command to “be fruitful and multiply”¹ appears to be the only law in Scripture which mankind does a decent job of fulfilling. Yet when considering how sin and death have corrupted the world, human procreation is not left untouched by the curses brought on creation. Thus childbirth too must be attended by ritual observances and purification, which themselves will prefigure Baptism.

Vs.1-5

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Childbirth, like menstruation, renders a woman ceremonially unclean in the eyes of the Mosaic Law. God has made clear that a creature's blood is effectively its life,² which means a theological aspect to menstruation and childbirth. A woman gives of her own life as her body maintains its fertility; in childbirth, she sheds her own blood – again, her life – to ensure that the infant may take their first breaths. This means that during such times as she has discharges of blood, she is “unclean” in the sense that she may not be present at religious observances, especially not sacrifices. Her status is not a moral judgment against her, but rather a strong message about sacrifice itself: the only lifeblood to be shed by

1 Genesis 1:28

2 Genesis 9:4

the altar is that of the *animal sacrifices*, so as to keep the focus on redemption and relationship with God. Again, we understand this to not be a “sin” issue, as the New Covenant has fulfilled the Old; now, no one is considered ceremonially unclean,³ so all may approach our Lord with boldness.⁴ Contrary to what some church bodies may proclaim today, menstruating women are not prohibited from taking Communion or participating in daily religious life.

There are different programs of purification for mothers here based on whether they bear male or female infants. This is most likely done with the sanctification of the child in mind. Males were expected to be circumcised in accordance with the covenant of circumcision given to Abraham,⁵ wherein a male born into the house was circumcised as a physical marker of belonging to God. While there were other cultures which utilized forms of circumcision, those cultures typically did so to mark priests, slaves, or functionaries;⁶ having the men of Israel circumcised provides a distinct witness to pagan nations that these men belong to *God*, not their pharaohs or landowners. Since females cannot be circumcised (so-called “female circumcision” today is an unholy abomination), they are kept in occlusion with their mother for a longer time to make up for it.

In the New Testament it is revealed that Baptism replaces circumcision, and both males and females are Baptized.⁷ The Sacrament shares with the old rite that one who has not undergone it ought not be considered part of God's people; an uncircumcised Israelite is no Israelite, and an unbaptized believer is not to be considered a Christian. This means that the rite is what brings the child *into* God's people, making both sacramental. As the male Israelite child is sanctified by the act of circumcision, the mother's time of purification is a little longer than a month. It bears repeating, since the female cannot be circumcised, the longer period of “impurity” serves the same purpose as circumcision. A girl who has gone through that two-month process is for all intents and purposes a daughter of Israel the same way that a boy who has been circumcised is officially an Israelite, just as all who receive Baptism may be considered Christians.

Vs.6-8

6 “And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, 7 and he shall offer it before the LORD and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female. 8 And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

Women shed blood as part of their unique life-giving ability. When pregnant, her lifeblood imparts the nutrients which build up the life of a child as God knits the infant together.⁸ The blood of a woman's travail in childbirth is not a sinful thing. However, without the Fall in Eden there would not have been any blood *shed* during the procreative process, nor any pain.⁹ The burnt offering then is not an atonement in the sense of forgiving any sin she committed, but rather a *recognition*. By offering the lamb, she proclaims her purification complete and renders thanks to the Lord for her recovery.

A woman is not sinning by fulfilling her unique maternal habitude. However, during those first crucial months of the child's life, she may have sinned while still being barred from access to the altar. The turtledove or pigeon covers these sins as a matter of insurance, since Moses has already written on

3 Acts 10:28

4 Hebrews 4:16

5 Genesis 17:1-14

6 Egypt is the most famous example of this practice outside of ancient Israel.

7 Colossians 2:11-12

8 Psalm 139:13

9 Genesis 3:16

the concept of unintentional sins. Interestingly, this single dove covers *all* of her sins committed during this time. Typically a single sin was warrant enough for a sin offering; if that logic was applied equally here, the mother would have to offer many sacrifices since human beings sin every day. Yet here, the turtledove presents a complete atonement for her. This foreshadows the universality of the Atonement won by Christ on the Cross for us, just as much as the annual Day of Atonement does; by His one death, all sins have been paid for, just as one animal died for the people every year in ancient Israel. Presumably, since the mother will have her infant with her when she offers up the pigeon to the priest, the sin offering will be the first time that child is exposed to the Gospel in its veiled Old Covenant form, experiencing a kind of Day of Atonement in miniature.