



Leviticus - Chapter Twelve

IV Leviticus 11:1-15:33 - The Laws on Cleanness and Uncleanness (continues)

Summary of Chapter Twelve

A woman who has just given birth is considered unclean. The loss of blood signifies that one is incomplete and unclean. Three steps are required to move from defilement to purity:

1. The woman is to remain unclean for seven or fourteen days, depending on the gender of the child.
2. She then moves into the second stage, which lasts for thirty-three to sixty-six days in which she is neither pure nor impure.
3. Finally, she offers sacrifices in order to enter into full communion with the covenant people.

The time of purification for the mother is twice as long if she gives birth to a female rather than a male. The reason is uncertain, although it may be that the female is potentially more unclean because of the probability of her menstruating and of her giving birth. Also, the male child is circumcised on the eighth day, identifying him as belonging to God. In any event, there is no implication that the reason for the distinction is any kind of presumed inferiority of women.

IV.c Leviticus 12:1-8 - Purification of Women after Childbirth

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. ³ On the eighth day the flesh of his

foreskin shall be circumcised. ⁴ Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed.

Leviticus 12:1-4

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days. The child was then circumcised on the eighth day, with the ceremonial uncleanness lasting an additional thirty-three days, for a total of forty days of ceremonial impurity after giving birth to a male child.

As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. Both childbirth and menstruation cause the discharge of blood from the body and God considers this to a cause for a woman's uncleanness, as it does for anyone who comes into contact with her discharge: *<<Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening; whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening>>* (Leviticus 15:21-23).

This law, which kept a woman isolated from her community, was the reason why the woman with the constant discharge was in such a desperate state. Yet simply coming into contact with Jesus cured her instantly: *<<Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hæmorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hæmorrhage stopped>>* (Luke 8:43-44). It should also be noted that Jesus did not become unclean by coming into contact with the woman. Jesus not only fulfils the law, he turns it on its head!

She shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary. The commanded time of ceremonial impurity should not be regarded as a negative attitude towards birth or child-bearing on God's part. God commands child bearing, in that man is commanded to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1:28; children are regarded as a gift from God: *<<Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward>>* (Psalm 127:3), and a woman with many children is considered blessed: *<<Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children will be like olive shoots around your table>>* (Psalm 128:3).

The key to understanding this ceremony is to understand the idea of original sin. As wonderful as a new baby is, God wanted it to be remembered that with every birth another sinner is brought into the world, and the woman was here symbolically responsible for bringing a new sinner into the world. Perhaps just as importantly, the time of ceremonial impurity gave the new mother a time of rest and seclusion that she would no doubt have welcomed.

⁵ If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.

Leviticus 12:5

If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean for two weeks. The time period for each phase was double of that when giving birth to a son. For the birth of a daughter, a woman was unclean for fourteen days followed by a period of sixty-six days for purification.

Her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. The longer period of ceremonial uncleanness for the birth of a daughter should not be understood as a penalty. Instead, it is linked to the idea stated in the previous verses, that the time of impurity is for the symbolic responsibility of bringing other sinners into the world. When giving birth to a female, a mother brings a sinner into the world who will probably bring still more sinners into the world.

Some commentators also suggest the longer period of time in connection with the birth of a girl was because girls are usually smaller at birth, and this would allow more time for the mother's focused care and attention on the child. As well, since sons were more prized, the longer time at home for a mother with a new born girl would force the family to bond more deeply, over a more extended period of time with the new born girl.

⁶ When the days of her purification 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 in its first year for a burnt-offering, and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering. ⁷ He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female.

Leviticus 12:6-7

He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This was a fairly standard sacrifice for atonement, holding the woman symbolically responsible for bringing another sinner into this world. The required sacrifice was the same for her who bears a child, male or female as was performed on the woman's behalf by the priest.

⁸ If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt-offering and the other for a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.

Leviticus 12:8

A sheep, two turtle-doves or two pigeons. This was confirmed in 5:11 and was an indication of the poverty of Joseph and Mary at the time of Jesus' dedication: <<*When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'*>> (Luke 2:22-24).