



## Leviticus - Chapter Thirteen

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

#### Summary of Chapter Thirteen

This chapter deals with uncleanness brought about by leprosy. The NRSVA adopts the traditional rendering leprosy for the Hebrew *tsara'at*, but its exact modern equivalent is unclear, particularly in view of the fact that it manifests itself not only in humans but also in clothes and articles (Leviticus 13:47-59), and even in the walls of houses (14:34-53). The term used in Leviticus is in fact generic: it could include many skin ailments, such as psoriasis, urticaria (hives), favus (which produces honeycomb-shaped crusts), and leukoderma (which produces white patches on the skin). What today is called leprosy, i.e. Hansen's disease, was unknown in the Near East at the time of Leviticus. Clear references to it do not occur until the late first millennium BC.

#### **IV.d Leviticus 13:1-14:57 - Leprous Diseases and Their Purification**

These chapters deal with a specific skin disease called *tsara'at*. Chapter 13 addresses cases of the disease on the human skin (13:1-46), followed by a case affecting clothes and articles (13:47-58). Chapter 14 gives the prescribed purificatory rite for the healed person (14:1-32) along with the purificatory rite for an afflicted house (14:33-53).

#### **IV.d.i Leviticus 13:1-59 - Leprosy: Varieties and Symptoms**

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: <sup>2</sup> When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, he shall be brought to

Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. <sup>3</sup> The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body, and if the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; after the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him ceremonially unclean. <sup>4</sup> But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall confine the diseased person for seven days. <sup>5</sup> The priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if he sees that the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall confine him for seven days more. <sup>6</sup> The priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the disease has abated and the disease has not spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean. <sup>7</sup> But if the eruption spreads in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest. <sup>8</sup> The priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

#### Leviticus 13:1-8

The basic symptoms of a leprous disease are given in vv.2-3, i.e. the hair in the diseased area has turned white and the disease appears to be deeper than the skin of his body.

The priest shall examine the disease on the skin of his body. In this sense, the priests served as public health officers and diagnosed the disease from these carefully defined criteria, not from intuition or by guessing.

The priest shall pronounce. By this means, the priest makes the status of uncleanness official. The person receiving such a pronouncement must dwell outside the camp, as stated in vv.45-46, until he or she becomes clean. The authority of the priest cannot be overruled: *<<Guard against an outbreak of a leprous skin disease by being very careful; you shall carefully observe whatever the levitical priests instruct you, just as I have commanded them>>* (Deuteronomy 24:8)

These judgements were based on sound medical diagnosis and concern. They were made more with the idea of protecting the community from the outbreak of disease than with the idea of the rights of the individual. Illnesses such as smallpox, measles, and scarlet fever might start out with a skin condition considered to be leprosy, and the person would be isolated for the necessary

time until the condition cleared up. This quarantine helped prevent the spread of these diseases among the people of Israel.

**Unclean.** This requires such persons to live outside the camp until they are free of their disease (vv.45-46), and to present a sacrifice as part of a cleansing ceremony (14:1-32). Modern readers should not confuse this kind of uncleanness with ‘being under God’s condemnation,’ nor even with ‘excluded from the love of the community’; the purpose of this law is to prevent what is unclean from coming into contact with what is holy, a contact that would be dangerous for the unclean person and for the whole community.

<sup>9</sup> When a person contracts a leprous disease, he shall be brought to the priest. <sup>10</sup> The priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white swelling in the skin that has turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh in the swelling, <sup>11</sup> it is a chronic leprous disease in the skin of his body. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; he shall not confine him, for he is unclean. <sup>12</sup> But if the disease breaks out in the skin, so that it covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see, <sup>13</sup> then the priest shall make an examination, and if the disease has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; since it has all turned white, he is clean. <sup>14</sup> But if raw flesh ever appears on him, he shall be unclean; <sup>15</sup> the priest shall examine the raw flesh and pronounce him unclean. Raw flesh is unclean, for it is a leprous disease. <sup>16</sup> But if the raw flesh again turns white, he shall come to the priest; <sup>17</sup> the priest shall examine him, and if the disease has turned white, the priest shall pronounce the diseased person clean. He is clean.

### Leviticus 13:9-17

This is the case of a person with a severe, chronic skin condition. The patient has **raw flesh**, i.e. it is oozing from broken skin, red, and active. His condition is easily recognisable, and therefore no quarantine is needed. The priest simply declares him ritually **unclean** and impure, whereas Jesus has the power to immediately cure the disease, although it would be the priest who would declare the man clean: <<*A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean.’ Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean!’ Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them’>> (Mark 1:40-44).*

<sup>18</sup> When there is on the skin of one's body a boil that has healed, <sup>19</sup> and in the place of the boil there appears a white swelling or a reddish-white spot, it shall be shown to the priest. <sup>20</sup> The priest shall make an examination, and if it appears deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; this is a leprous disease, broken out in the boil. <sup>21</sup> But if the priest examines it and the hair on it is not white, nor is it deeper than the skin but has abated, the priest shall confine him for seven days. <sup>22</sup> If it spreads in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is diseased. <sup>23</sup> But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread, it is the scar of the boil; the priest shall pronounce him clean. <sup>24</sup> Or, when the body has a burn on the skin and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a spot, reddish-white or white, <sup>25</sup> the priest shall examine it. If the hair in the spot has turned white and it appears deeper than the skin, it is a leprous disease; it has broken out in the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean. This is a leprous disease. <sup>26</sup> But if the priest examines it and the hair in the spot is not white, and it is no deeper than the skin but has abated, the priest shall confine him for seven days. <sup>27</sup> The priest shall examine him on the seventh day; if it is spreading in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean. This is a leprous disease. <sup>28</sup> But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread in the skin but has abated, it is a swelling from the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him clean; for it is the scar of the burn. <sup>29</sup> When a man or woman has a disease on the head or in the beard, <sup>30</sup> the priest shall examine the disease. If it appears deeper than the skin and the hair in it is yellow and thin, the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is an itch, a leprous disease of the head or the beard. <sup>31</sup> If the priest examines the itching disease, and it appears no deeper than the skin and there is no black hair in it, the priest shall confine the person with the itching disease for seven days. <sup>32</sup> On the seventh day the priest shall examine the itch; if the itch has not spread, and there is no yellow hair in it, and the itch appears to be no deeper than the skin, <sup>33</sup> he shall shave, but the itch he shall not shave. The priest shall confine the person with the itch for seven days more. <sup>34</sup> On the seventh day the priest shall examine the itch; if the itch has not spread in the skin and it appears to be no deeper than the skin, the priest shall pronounce him clean. He shall wash his clothes and be clean. <sup>35</sup> But if

the itch spreads in the skin after he was pronounced clean, <sup>36</sup> the priest shall examine him. If the itch has spread in the skin, the priest need not seek for the yellow hair; he is unclean. <sup>37</sup> But if in his eyes the itch is checked, and black hair has grown in it, the itch is healed, he is clean; and the priest shall pronounce him clean. <sup>38</sup> When a man or a woman has spots on the skin of the body, white spots, <sup>39</sup> the priest shall make an examination, and if the spots on the skin of the body are of a dull white, it is a rash that has broken out on the skin; he is clean. <sup>40</sup> If anyone loses the hair from his head, he is bald but he is clean. <sup>41</sup> If he loses the hair from his forehead and temples, he has baldness of the forehead but he is clean. <sup>42</sup> But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased spot, it is a leprous disease breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead. <sup>43</sup> The priest shall examine him; if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, which resembles a leprous disease in the skin of the body, <sup>44</sup> he is leprous, he is unclean. The priest shall pronounce him unclean; the disease is on his head.

#### Leviticus 13:18-44

These rules deal with various cases of the leprous disease in relation to other common skin diseases or disorders, such as a boil (vv.18-23), a burn (vv.24-28), itching disease (vv.29-37), white spots or leukoderma (vv.38-39), and baldness (vv.40-44). This section clearly shows the very specific rules for making a specific diagnosis of leprosy. The specific details given in so many different situations emphasise that God did not want this to be guesswork but the result of careful examination. Such a serious diagnosis should not be the result of a guess.

The priest is responsible for discerning whether or not the condition is one that makes a person unclean: <<*You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses*>> (Leviticus 10:10-11); this is one way in which the priesthood is to serve the well-being of the people.

This is a leprous disease. Leprosy in the OT referred to a number of skin diseases and was not limited to what is referred to now as Hansen's disease, a condition not known at the time of Leviticus. It was dealt with so seriously because it was such a horrible disease, was highly contagious, and it was also a dramatic picture of sin and its spiritual operation in human beings. When leprosy first appears on the skin, it begins as small, red spots. Before too long they get bigger, and start to turn white, with a shiny or scaly appearance. Then the spots spread over the entire

body and the hair begins to fall out, first from the head, then even from the eyebrows. As things get worse, the finger nails and toenails become loose; they start to rot and eventually fall off. Then the joints of fingers and toes begin to rot and start to fall off piece by piece. The gums start shrinking and cannot hold teeth anymore, so each of them is lost. Leprosy keeps eating away at the face until the nose is literally lost, and the palate and even eyes rot, and the victim wastes away until death.

**God demonstrated his power in inflict and cure leprosy to Moses, Aaron and Miriam:** <<Again, the Lord said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. Then God said, 'Put your hand back into your cloak' – so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body>> (Exodus 4:6-7), and: <<When the cloud went away from over the tent, Miriam had become leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned towards Miriam and saw that she was leprous. Then Aaron said to Moses, 'Oh, my lord, do not punish us for a sin that we have so foolishly committed'>> (Numbers 12:10-11).

Leprosy is like sin in many ways. There are some good reasons why many ancient rabbis considered a leper as someone already dead. Leprosy is like sin in that:

- It begins as nothing. It is painless in its early stages.
- It grows slowly.
- It often remits for a while and then returns.
- It numbs the senses; one cannot feel in the afflicted area.
- It causes decay and deformity.
- It gives a person a repulsive appearance.

<sup>45</sup> The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.'<sup>46</sup> He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

#### Leviticus 13:45-46

The person with a skin disease is to tear his clothes, go about with an unadorned head, and have his beard and mouth covered. These are all signs of mourning in the OT: <<Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead. Bind on your turban, and put your sandals on your feet; do not cover your upper lip or eat the bread of mourners>> (Ezekiel 24:17), and: <<the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God>> (Micah 3:7). Here they symbolise that a person is ritually

dead. Luke 17:12-13 describes where lepers stood at a distance and called for help from Jesus: <<*As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!'*>>.

He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. As stringent as all this was, eventually they Jews went further. In the days of Jesus many Jews thought two things about a leper:

1. They were the walking dead.
2. They deserved this because this is the punishment of God against them for their sin.

Jewish custom said that a person should not even greet a leper, and had to stay six feet away from a leper. One Rabbi bragged that he would not even buy an egg on a street where he saw a leper, and another boasted that he threw rocks at lepers to keep them far from him. Rabbis did not even allow a leper to wash his face. But Jesus was different. He loved lepers; he touched them and healed them when they had no hope at all; refer to Matthew 8:1-4 and Luke 17:11-19. Because of modern drugs and treatments, leprosy is almost unknown in the western world. However, it remains a global issue and there are some 15 million lepers worldwide, almost all of them in third-world nations.

<sup>47</sup> Concerning clothing: when a leprous disease appears in it, in woollen or linen cloth, <sup>48</sup> in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in anything made of skin, <sup>49</sup> if the disease shows greenish or reddish in the garment, whether in warp or woof or in skin or in anything made of skin, it is a leprous disease and shall be shown to the priest. <sup>50</sup> The priest shall examine the disease, and put the diseased article aside for seven days. <sup>51</sup> He shall examine the disease on the seventh day. If the disease has spread in the cloth, in warp or woof, or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, this is a spreading leprous disease; it is unclean. <sup>52</sup> He shall burn the clothing, whether diseased in warp or woof, woollen or linen, or anything of skin, for it is a spreading leprous disease; it shall be burned in fire. <sup>53</sup> If the priest makes an examination, and the disease has not spread in the clothing, in warp or woof or in anything of skin, <sup>54</sup> the priest shall command them to wash the article in which the disease appears, and he shall put it aside for seven days more. <sup>55</sup> The priest shall examine the diseased article after it has been washed. If the diseased spot has not changed colour, though the disease has not spread, it is unclean; you shall burn it in fire, whether the leprous spot is on the inside or on the outside. <sup>56</sup> If

the priest makes an examination, and the disease has abated after it is washed, he shall tear the spot out of the cloth, in warp or woof, or out of skin. <sup>57</sup> If it appears again in the garment, in warp or woof, or in anything of skin, it is spreading; you shall burn with fire that in which the disease appears. <sup>58</sup> But the cloth, warp or woof, or anything of skin from which the disease disappears when you have washed it, shall then be washed a second time, and it shall be clean. <sup>59</sup> This is the ritual for a leprous disease in a cloth of wool or linen, either in warp or woof, or in anything of skin, to decide whether it is clean or unclean.

### Leviticus 13:47-59

Except for the symptoms and actual treatments such as washing, the procedure of the examination in cases of leprous disease in a garment follows that of the cases for humans. Causes of such disease include various moulds or fungi. When it becomes clear that the suspected area is affected by the disease, the treatment, i.e. tear or burn it, is destructive; the object must no longer be used, or has to be completely abandoned: <<*They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean*>> (Ezekiel 44:23).

The priest shall examine the disease, and put the diseased article aside for seven days. The priests had to make careful determination to see if a garment might pass on a contagious disease or if it could still be used.