



Leviticus - Chapter Fifteen

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

Summary of Chapter Fifteen

The rules in this chapter are symmetrically structured:

- A serious case of male discharge (vv.2-15).
- Man's emission of semen (vv.16-17).
- Sexual intercourse (v.18).
- Female menstruation (vv.19-24).
- A serious case of female discharge (vv.25-30).

One characteristic of these regulations is their emphasis on the transmission of contagion from one person to another. Transmission of infection may occur in any number of ways; for example: by sitting on an object that a defiled person had previously sat on, by touching contaminated cooking utensils, and by having direct contact through touching or spitting. No matter how it happens, the person infected is required to separate from their community and to undergo the purification ritual.

It is clear that unclean is not the same as sinful, but rather has to do with what is permitted. The Bible does not view the process of reproduction, with its associated bodily functions, as evil; this is part of the original good creation, even though human nature is severely damaged by the fall of Adam. Certainly the Creator of these functions has the right to tell his obedient creatures how and when to use them.

IV.e Leviticus 15:1-33 - Concerning Bodily Discharges

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ² Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any man has a discharge from his member, his discharge makes him ceremonially unclean. ³ The uncleanness of his discharge is this: whether his member flows with his discharge, or his member is stopped from discharging, it is uncleanness for him. ⁴ Every bed on which the one with the discharge lies shall be unclean; and everything on which he sits shall be unclean. ⁵ Anyone who touches his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁶ All who sit on anything on which the one with the discharge has sat shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁷ All who touch the body of the one with the discharge shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁸ If the one with the discharge spits on persons who are clean, then they shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ⁹ Any saddle on which the one with the discharge rides shall be unclean. ¹⁰ All who touch anything that was under him shall be unclean until the evening, and all who carry such a thing shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹¹ All those whom the one with the discharge touches without his having rinsed his hands in water shall wash their clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹² Any earthen vessel that the one with the discharge touches shall be broken; and every vessel of wood shall be rinsed in water. ¹³ When the one with a discharge is cleansed of his discharge, he shall count seven days for his cleansing; he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in fresh water, and he shall be clean. ¹⁴ On the eighth day he shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons and come before the Lord to the entrance of the tent of meeting and give them to the priest. ¹⁵ The priest shall offer them, one for a sin-offering and the other for a burnt-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on his behalf before the Lord for his discharge.

Leviticus 15:1-15

When any man has a discharge from his member, his discharge makes him ceremonially unclean. The idea appears restricted to some obviously abnormal genital discharge, indicating some type of disease. When this occurs, the man was to be somewhat isolated in order not to pass on the infection or uncleanness to anyone else.

His member. The Hebrew *basar*, translated member, body or flesh, is used euphemistically here for the genitals. In fact, the same word is used in v.19 of the female vagina.

The priest shall make atonement on his behalf before the Lord for his discharge. After the discharge had stopped, a sacrifice had to be made.

¹⁶ If a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹⁷ Everything made of cloth or of skin on which the semen falls shall be washed with water, and be unclean until the evening. ¹⁸ If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening.

Leviticus 15:16-18

The emission of semen, whether accidental or as a result of a sexual act, is polluting, perhaps because it is the life liquid and its loss makes a man unclean. However, atonement was not necessary for such emissions that came from lovemaking with one's wife.

The case of Onan, who would not perform as a proper husband to his dead brother's wife, provides an interesting insight into how God views the proper emission of semen: <<Then Judah said to Onan, 'Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.' But since Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, he spilled his semen on the ground whenever he went in to his brother's wife, so that he would not give offspring to his brother. What he did was displeasing in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also>> (Genesis 38:8-10).

If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. In the case of an emission of semen, both the man and his wife needed to ceremonially cleanse themselves and respect a brief time of ceremonial impurity.

¹⁹ When a woman has a discharge of blood that is her regular discharge from her body, she shall be in her impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening. ²⁰ Everything upon which she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. ²¹ Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ²² Whoever touches anything upon which she sits shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening;

²³ whether it is the bed or anything upon which she sits, when he touches it he shall be unclean until the evening.

Leviticus 15:19-23

When a woman has a discharge of blood. A woman who is menstruating is unclean, and her uncleanness may be transmitted to others. The structure of this passage corresponds to that of the male with a discharge earlier in the chapter.

Although the law was not in force at the time of Jacob, it was a concept that was practised, as can be seen by the reaction of Laban when searching his daughter's tent for his missing household gods, which she had stolen from him: <<Now Rachel had taken the household gods and put them in the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt all about in the tent, but did not find them. And she said to her father, 'Let not my lord be angry that I cannot rise before you, for the way of women is upon me.' So he searched, but did not find the household gods>> (Genesis 31:34-35).

²⁴ If any man lies with her, and her impurity falls on him, he shall be unclean for seven days; and every bed on which he lies shall be unclean.

Leviticus 15:24

If a man has sexual relations with a woman during her menstrual period, then he is considered unclean for seven days. That is the same length of time as is prescribed for the woman herself. It has often been alleged that this rule conflicts with 18:19 and 20:18, in which both parties are cut off from Israel. How are these statements to be harmonised? Perhaps the present verse deals only with the ritual implications of the act, or perhaps it is concerned with an inadvertent sexual act, whereas the later texts focus on a brazen breaking of the law. The texts simply seem to be dealing with different circumstances.

²⁵ If a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, for all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.

²⁶ Every bed on which she lies during all the days of her discharge shall be treated as the bed of her impurity; and everything on which she sits shall be unclean, as in the uncleanness of her impurity. ²⁷ Whoever touches these things shall be unclean, and shall wash his clothes, and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening. ²⁸ If she is cleansed of her discharge, she shall count seven days, and after that she shall

be clean. ²⁹ On the eighth day she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ³⁰ The priest shall offer one for a sin-offering and the other for a burnt-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf before the Lord for her unclean discharge.

Leviticus 15:25-30

If she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity. These laws are concerned with irregular or unnatural flows of blood from a female, as confirmed by the woman who has a long-term discharge of blood as recorded in Matthew 9:20-22, Mark 5:25-34 and Luke 8:43-48.

³¹ Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst. ³² This is the ritual for those who have a discharge: for him who has an emission of semen, becoming unclean thereby, ³³ for her who is in the infirmity of her period, for anyone, male or female, who has a discharge, and for the man who lies with a woman who is unclean.

Leviticus 15:31-33

This section concludes with a warning and summary. You in v.31 refers to Moses and Aaron, as confirmed by 10:11.

Defiling my tabernacle. The presence of uncleanness in the camp constantly defiles the sanctuary; this idea prepares for the need for its cleansing in the Day of Atonement ritual; refer to 16:16. None of these discharges made a man or a woman sinful, only ceremonially unclean. This did promote hygiene in ancient Israel, yet discharges of semen and menstruation were so regarded, not because there was anything inherently wrong with them, but because the two are connected with symbols of life and redemption, blood and seed.

My tabernacle that is in their midst. This made an obvious separation between sex and the worship of God. To the modern world this seems normal, but in the ancient world it was common to worship the gods by having sex with temple prostitutes. God did not want this association in his worship.

It is important to regard these laws of cleanliness in a NT perspective. In Mark 7:1-9 Jesus criticised the Pharisees for their over-emphasis on ceremonial cleanliness and their lack of regard for internal cleanliness. These laws were meant to have both hygienic reasons and spiritual applications; they were never intended as the way to be right with God. In Acts Chapter 15, the early

Christian community properly discerned the work and will of God in the New Covenant that, under the New Covenant, the believer was not bound to these laws of ritual purity. One could be a follower of Jesus without the ritual conformity to the Mosaic Law. Yet it needs to be remembered that spiritual cleanliness in worship is just as important today. It should also be remembered that Jesus is the one who makes a person clean and fit for fellowship: <<*You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you*>> (John 15:3). As a person receives from the Word of God, they are being cleansed. Their cleanliness is complete as they abide in Jesus: <<*but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*>> (1 John 1:7-9).