

Whole Again

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Preacher: Stephen Ballingall

[0 : 01] Read God's Word, so please do pick up your Bibles and turn to Leviticus, chapter 12. Later in our service, Stephen Ballingall will be preaching to us from this much neglected part of God's Word, which is all about living at one with the Lord of life.

And tonight we're going to be dipping into a rather big section of the book from chapter 12 up to chapter 15, but we're not going to look at every detail, but Stephen has helpfully picked out some key verses from the section for us to read together.

So we're going to do that now. We're going to read the first little reading, and it's in chapter 12, verses 1 to 8. So hear the word of the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 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. And on the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for 33 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. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation.

[1 : 37] And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for 66 days. 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 turtle dove for a sin offering.

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.

And if she cannot afford a lamb, then 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 for her, and she shall be clean.

And then just look on to chapter 13, as you can see. The Lord goes on to speak about laws concerning not just leprosy, but various skin diseases, which really continues on to the end of chapter 14.

Other infectious things are mentioned in this section, but it's mostly to do with skin diseases. And just look on to chapter 13, verse 45. Let's listen to these key verses.

[3 : 01] Chapter 13, verse 45. The leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose.

And he shall cover his lip, his upper lip, and cry out, Unclean, unclean. 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. And then into chapter 15, the focus is on dealing with bodily discharges.

And at the very end of the chapter, verse 31, chapter 15, verse 31, it sums up really the reason as to why the Lord has given all of these commandments in section that runs from chapter 12 to 15.

So let's read chapter 15, verse 31, where the Lord sums up this section. Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.

[4 : 20] Well, amen. And may God bless to us his word. And it is all his word that we must take seriously. Good evening, all.

If you could have your Bibles open at Leviticus 12, that would be helpful as we go through this long section together. It's quite a large section from chapter 12 through to chapter 15, so we'll try to pick up the grand sweep of these laws, zoning in on the key lessons that the Lord teaches through them.

Can you hear me now? Have you ever had guests around the house that you have been just desperate to get rid of? The vast majority of the time, it's wonderful and a real blessing to have folks over for some time, and it's something we really enjoy doing as a church family.

But occasionally, you might just have a guest who is so unpleasant that you are desperate to get them out the door because they've brought such a bad atmosphere into your house. It could be the person who always brings up that political or theological issue that they know you disagree with, and they just keep picking away at it, even though you're obviously uncomfortable with it.

It could be that they have not taken the hint that even though you've put the dishes away, you've said you've got an early morning, and you've gone and got your pajamas on, they're still there.

[5 : 49] They can't take the hint. They can't take the hint, just one more story, and then they'll leave. Or maybe you've had someone around who, before they arrived, considered it a good and wise idea to decant half a can of lynx Africa on their body before arriving, and it stings the nostrils.

You can taste it at the back of your throat for weeks later. There is such a thing as an unwelcome guest, those you won't be inviting back too quickly because of how awful the experience of having them over was the first time.

Well, in these chapters of Leviticus, the Lord paints a picture of house guests who've come round to his house and trashed the place and have left the stench of death and decay after they finally left.

And who is this unwelcome house guest? Well, it's us, of course. It's broken humanity, men and women under the curse of sin.

Except we're not just bringing social tension or an overpowering aftershave into his house, but we are bringing our sin and our brokenness into his presence, leaving a foul stench behind.

[7 : 05] And we can't help but do it time and time again. It's inevitable because we are people under the curse who bring all of our sin and shame into the presence of God when we meet with him.

We leave the stench of the curse behind. Death and decay follow us. They're like the smell that follows us wherever we go. And we desperately need redemption from that because our God is a holy God.

He is the God of perfect, full purity and he's so holy that he cannot live in the presence of sin. No one under the curse may see him and live.

So we should be thrown out of God's presence, out into the street, out into the gutter, taking our mess and sin elsewhere. Someone else's property. That's the picture this section paints.

We are the unwelcome house guests because we are sinners who bring all of our filth into God's house. And the wonderful message full of grace and love for us this evening is this, that our God is the great reverser of the curse.

[8 : 21] our God, the perfect, holy one unstained from any of the death and decay that plagues us. Yet, he is the one who will make us clean, who will invite us into his presence to experience not death and decay but life and feasting in all of its fullness and joy.

He is the God who will make humanity and all of creation whole again. Because his salvation is cosmic. He's interested in fixing everything that is wrong with our creation.

He wants not only to remove the sin that's in our lives but he wants to banish the whole curse forever. Turning this creation which is so tainted with death and decay on its head renewing it as the dwelling place of life itself.

He is the great reverser of the curse and we see the seeds of that right here in the gathering of his people. He grants cleansing to his people.

We can't clean ourselves so that we might come near to him and draw near to his life giving presence. As a reminder this section in chapters 12-15 is part of a slightly larger one beginning at chapter 11 and ending at the end of our section.

[9 : 47] And last week we saw that the world out there is not neutral. That the Lord wanted his people to critically think about the world out there about this sin that they didn't want seeping into their lives.

And this week we see that our world and we ourselves are broken and need to be cleansed of our sin in here.

And we'll see that in three stages. We'll see firstly the sickness that spreads then that God removes to restore and finally that the curse is reversed.

So firstly we'll take the broad sweep of these chapters and see the sickness that spreads. And now the sweeping emphasis of these chapters is on death creeping in to the people God is living amongst.

When God tabernacled with his people he was in the neighbourhood. He lived there. People could physically walk up and meet him at his doorstep. But of course Israel exactly like ourselves were an unclean and sinful people.

[10 : 53] and that was utterly inevitable. And we'll see that by looking at what the Lord says makes a person unclean. So chapter 12 we have childbirth.

Giving birth makes a woman unclean. And just to make it clear at the start this is not trying to shame women of course not. But it's saying that in the act of giving birth the woman has done something which is under the curse which brings her close to death particularly in the ancient culture.

It's still a biblically good thing to do. Being fruitful and multiplying it's commanded by the Lord and the Bible says that his children are a blessing. But childbirth is marked by the curse.

In pain shall you bring forth children. And that is seen by a loss of blood. That's why the woman becomes unclean. Blood in Leviticus symbolises more than just what it is physically.

It represents the life of that person. So losing that is a really significant thing. Chapter 17 explains it more fully you can look there later if you like that the loss of blood symbolises the loss of life of death and decay of the curse creeping into even the good things we do like having children.

[12 : 14] And you might have spotted that in verse 5 the period of uncleanness after giving birth to a girl is twice that of giving birth to a boy. And it's not saying that boys are somehow more clean or more holy than girls.

Spend one week on the crest team and you'll find out that's not the case. There's no superiority here. Reading that in and calling it discrimination would be letting culture decide what the Bible is rather than the other way around.

And the text doesn't give an obvious answer but it may have to do with the fact that the boy is circumcised on the eighth day. That somehow he shares in the cleansing period.

That this period of uncleanness is halved by the sacrifices made at the time of circumcision. That the covenant seal contributes towards this cleansing period.

Then chapters 13 and 14 deal with various skin conditions and diseases. And this section isn't brimming with verses you're likely to have on your fridge or printed on the wall.

[13 : 19] Although I will say that there is one verse that may give certain among our senior men encouragement that they may need to hear today. Chapter 13 verse 40 If a man's hair falls out from his head he is bald he is clean.

Stick that on your fridge bald brothers and have no shame. Now we have the term leprosy in our Bibles but the diseases mentioned they don't actually fit with what leprosy is or Hansen's disease as we might call it today.

Instead this covers a broad range of infectious diseases. So when it says leprosy it's speaking of a kind of umbrella catch-all term for various skin diseases. And this is probably the least relatable part of scripture.

I mean there's this virus on the loose. There's quarantine periods. You have to isolate from the community. Test negative before coming back in. Cueing horrible flashbacks. We are closer to these laws than we think.

And these laws in chapter 13 to 14 all concern the spread of this disease. And people first followed by garments and then houses. And that category suggesting something like a dry rot or a black mold.

[14 : 39] There's an incredible amount of detail about how the disease is to be observed and what action is to be taken. The priest is given a really prominent role there not as a doctor but more like a public health inspector.

He's not there to heal them. He offers no remedy but he's there to observe and then take action. He's the one with the decisive vote on whether this person is allowed to re-enter the community or not.

And there's no specific cause given for these diseases. Only in the case of house mold is it said that the Lord strikes them with it in 14 verse 33 hinting at that instance being one of judgment.

But on the whole these appear to be diseases that can happen simply because Israel were like us living in a world under the curse. Chapter 15 goes on to speak of bodily discharges from both men and women and in many ways this mirrors the section in chapter 12 on childbirth.

that's done deliberately they form the bookends for this section so they hold it together as a piece reminding us that as life leaves the body in whatever form that it's evidence of life under the curse.

[15 : 53] That life which is sacred to God as it leaves a person's body renders them unclean removing them from corporate worship until they have washed and waited the set out time.

And it doesn't appear to be an obvious connection between childbirth to bodily fluids and skin conditions but these all appear as part of the fallen world as living under the curse.

That's what ties this together even when Israel did good good things like when a husband and wife enjoyed one another unclean when an illness strikes them from the blue unclean when they have children the blessing that they are unclean we as humans are marked by being under the curse that is present and evident in everything we do it's inevitable and these symptoms are all signs of a deeper disease if you remember from last week clean and unclean are different from holy and unholy as clean focuses on the ritual state and holy on the moral state but they're not completely unrelated ritual states are pointers and indicators to an inner moral state they reveal what is underneath so this section is teaching us of how sin operates too it's inevitable in people under the curse we are all sinners we know that so well don't we

I shouldn't have to convince anyone in the room of that even when we try to do good we often do it with sinful motives and for selfish reasons and part of what this section does is show just how invasive it is in all we do it permeates all that we are it picks some of the most normal things like family life getting sick eating all of that can render a person unclean this is a surprisingly down to earth book as it looks into every aspect of our existence and brings it before the Lord even the most mundane of things and the Lord sees the sin in every part of our lives and he cares about all of it he's that holy there is nothing in our lives that is not impacted by the curse because sinners sin we can't help ourselves and we will keep on struggling with this until our whole selves and all creation is redeemed until the curse has been reversed and that's where we come to our second point where we see that God removes to restore the most poignant part of this section is found in the story of the leper in many ways it's a remake or a retelling of the original story of Adam and Eve being thrown out of the garden of Eden as they brought the curse into the world through their rebellion against the Lord they were thrown out of the garden away from God's presence away from his life that's a picture we see repeated in chapter 13 verses 45 and 46 turn there with me please

I'll read that again the leprous person who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out unclean unclean 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 it's a grim picture isn't it total isolation cut off entirely from the community they knew and loved the details mentioned are deliberately chosen and they're trying to paint a picture as they describe the rituals of mourning torn clothes loose ragged hair covering your lip these were all the cultural norms for mourning death for grieving so the leprous person was put into a state where they were essentially attending their own funeral they were the walking dead shouting unclean stay away to anyone who came close in case the disease spread and more people were removed from the community gathered around

[20 : 36] God it would have been heartbreaking these people could still be believers they weren't thrown out from God's family but they were cut off from experiencing his goodness within the community which is where we all experience God's love it's in the community of believers Israel were given an acted parable of what their sin deserves death and decay are to have no place in the presence of God they are the unwelcome guests leaving behind a foul stench so the Lord has to remove them they're out and that seems severe cutting someone off like that but God's purpose is both kind and preventative chapter 15 verse 31 turn there now thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst in many ways this is the crucial verse for unlocking these laws the Lord wanted the people to come close and he wanted them to survive while doing so sometimes these laws in chapter 12 to 15 are called the health codes and you can understand why 99% of the material speaks about health there's lots of good health advice in there but the Lord did not give these laws so that

Israel would be hygienic clean he's not a clean freak he's not a God who can't handle things that are a bit gross if any of you go away thinking that these laws are about hygiene then I have utterly failed in my task of preaching this passage all of these laws are there to serve the Lord living with his people they're all relational that is the key focus of this text it's all about being restored to worship your creator to be with him to live with him to enjoy his presence and you can see this particularly in the laws for cleansing lepers in chapter 14 the ritual bringing them back was quite elaborate with a lot of detail and the whole camp would have known this was happening the healed leper is brought to the priest who continues his job as health inspector again the priest doesn't offer healing it must have come about otherwise in a way we've not heard of as the leper has called out to God for help the leper is still outside the camp and 14 verse 4 they take two ritually clean birds one is killed verse 5 and then dipped in the other one's blood and when the leper has been declared clean end of verse 7 that bird living bird flies off into the open field and there's identification going on between the bird and the leper it has been cleansed in the blood just as the leper is and then flies off into the field it's symbolizing visually the leprosy leaving that person going away from then verse 8 he washes and shaves and then waits a whole week but he is inside the camp at that point he is inside the camp he waits for a full seven days to pass and then he may offer sacrifices to the

Lord at the entrance of the tent of meeting the tabernacle he may approach the Lord once more the priest recommits this person to playing their part as a member of the covenant community they have been brought near they've been brought to the door of the tabernacle into God's presence and there they worship their God end of verse 18 the priest makes atonement for them he makes the worshiper and God at one reconciled together before the Lord that's the high point of this ritual and that signifies disease has left them notice that that's key but it's when they're restored to worship their God among his people that's the high point all of these washings are designed to bring a person back they're designed to bring the worshiper into the center of worship meeting with God and his people the high point not just of this but of all human existence is when we are gathered together in the presence of

God it's not when the person is healed as good as that is but when they are restored to worship their creator that's the high point and that may come as a bit of a surprise to our modern ears our world is so obsessed with being healthy with being well with making everything in this world right materially that's a huge thing the wellness industry is worth billions people strive for health and well being as though it's a thing you can buy as they seek to reverse the curse of sin that permeates all that we are and do the Lord was teaching Israel that their priority was to be in his presence that is the key the gathering of God is where we see the seeds of the curse being reversed the answer to the curse is not found outside of the church it's not found out there but inside in the presence of

God we are where the solution is to everything that's wrong with the world partly because in God's presence we are given a preview of what's coming in the new creation as we gather together with our brothers and sisters as one body in Christ as we take on his likeness treating each other as Christ would have us treat them we are exhibiting the future of everything our gathering should give us a taste of the new creation that there is a place in the world where anyone can walk up come on in and see a preview of what's coming that there's a group of people who genuinely love one another serve one another are of one mind and one heart with one another because God has cleaned and they may draw near to him united with their creator our greatest need is the life-giving goodness that only comes from our

[27 : 30] God so what we do as a church and as individuals must be geared towards that towards drawing near to him that has to be our priority in evangelism too it's all about bringing people near bringing them into him into God's presence as close as they can possibly get because that's where true restoration happens and finally our third point we'll see that the curse is reversed the Lord's salvation is much bigger than only dealing with the sin in our hearts he's got his eyes set on something far grander the Lord wants to redeem not only your heart but your body also and indeed the whole creation the curse infiltrates its way into everything in existence and humans can never truly deal with this disease that spreads like wildfire but Christ in his ministry gives a preview for how he was going to be the great reverser of the curse renewing creation as he bats death and decay away forever if you could turn now to

Mark's gospel chapter one you'll see a very helpful picture of how Christ begins to reverse the curse of sin Mark chapter one and verse 40 where the Lord Jesus comes face to face with an unclean leper outside the camp so reading from verse 40 and a leper came to Jesus imploring him and kneeling said to him if you will you can make me clean and now this should not have happened we should be shocked that this man approached Jesus he was a leper he should have been keeping miles away from him in case he infected Jesus and made him unclean he broke all the levitical rules he broke all protocol but he has faith that Christ somehow can cleanse him verse 41 moved with pity

Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him I will be clean and immediately the leprosy left him and he was made clean levitically speaking Jesus should be unclean there and need to wash and wait as a result of it but he breaks all the rules of broken humanity because he is the better humanity the second Adam the serpent crusher who's come to reverse the curse of sin and death immediately the leper is cleansed Jesus holiness is far more contagious than leprosy so he rebukes it bending it to his will as the creator comes to renew his creation reshaping it for what it was always destined for and that gives us just a hint just a glimpse of what Jesus has come to do his ministry is a writing of all creation a total reversal of the effects of the curse like the story of the woman who had a discharge of blood for 12 years 12 years of being ritually unclean of being unable to enter the temple for worship can you imagine that 12 years of not being able to come to church and praise

God and hear from his word together it must have been soul destroying for her and in faith this woman touches Jesus and instead of him becoming unclean she is immediately made well Jesus came to her house and he took her hand he touched a dead body so should have been unclean but instead she immediately becomes alive Jesus is the great reverser of the curse and that doesn't mean he's going to fix everything in this life we don't want to have unrealistic expectations about that God can give us glimpses but even then they are short lived and they're glimpses of something far greater to come in the future because he promises in the fullness of time to renew the whole of creation to redeem the bodies of all his sons and daughters who have been faithful to him and he will live with us we will live in the house of

God forever he is the perfect savior we need because we are all broken people I know we all scrub up well on a Sunday that we come looking decent and most of the time in good heart but we are weak and we are people of the curse I feel that anyway don't know about you the Lord sees into every aspect of our lives even the mundane things like what we eat our health our marriages our families and he sees just how broken you are he's not fooled even those among us who seem to be the most impressive capable people he sees your brokenness he sees all the reasons that you should not be allowed anywhere near him he sees how we struggle to cope with living in a fallen world and most of all he sees how we struggle with sin the curse of sin cries out to him unclean unclean every one of us here is sick with the exact same disease we are the unwelcome house guests we deserve to be outside the camp isolated alone cut off from

[33 : 50] God yet he is the God of the unclean he is the God who makes his home with the people who are under the curse whose lives are full of mess and who are utterly unclean to him he comes outside the camp to meet us he condescends to our grubby level and he does that so that we will draw near to him and that is the whole point of being made clean that we may approach him drawing near to him worshipping him together as part of his gathered community that is the whole point of being made clean that we can draw near to him just as the washings restored the Israelites to worship their God so does Christ's blood restore us to worship him together here and now. That's why he cleanses people, because he wants to live with us. He wants to be with us.

He wants us to draw near to him. That's why in Hebrews 10, it says, let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Notice that cleansing language, sprinkled clean, and washed. Why? Let us consider how to stir one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near. God provides a way for us to be clean, so that we might approach him and enjoy becoming more like him in his presence. And how much more should we enjoy the privileges of being able to draw near to him in worship, to enter his house, meet his family, and spend time with him?

Because that's what we're doing right now. Don't neglect the unbelievable privileges we have of being able to draw near to him in worship. You can't get too much of this.

How much more should we be enjoying this right now? That's the whole point of being made clean. That's why the Lord Jesus came and shed his cleansing blood for us, so that we may draw near to him, becoming the worshipers we were always destined to be. Could you imagine if that leper Jesus healed, or the woman with the discharge of blood, never enjoyed the privileges of being clean?

If they said, I know I'm clean now, I know I can come into God's presence once more, but I've got a lot of work to do this weekend, and besides, there's a game on the TV. Brothers and sisters, come to him. Keep on coming to him. Keep on doing so as part of the Lord's gathered people, as part of the church right now. Because we, the church, we are God's house.

[37 : 08] We are where he lives today. We are the guests who have been cleansed and invited in to enjoy communion with our God and Father. What we are doing right now is of eternal significance and cosmic significance. Because we are meeting and dwelling with the great reverser of the curse, the God who stoops down to our grubby level. The answer to the world's greatest problems are not out there. The world thinks they are. They think they have it all sorted, but they have no idea.

Any idea of how we fix the world that doesn't involve drawing near to Christ is doomed to fail. Because he is the one essential cog to fixing everything. If you remove him, everything fails.

He is the great reverser of the curse. He is the only one who will make creation whole again, right again. So friends, let us be thankful that the Lord Jesus has made us clean. Holiness does not come from in here.

We don't find it out there. It comes from the Lord alone. Our sin is inevitable because we are people under the curse. We are the unwelcome houseguests who leave destruction and death and decay trailing in our wake. But the Lord in the blood of his son makes a way for us to be cleansed and restored to him. So enjoy that privilege. Draw near to him.

Draw near to the great reverser of the curse and receive life in his name. Let's pray. Our holy father God Lord God We know that we come before you as people who are under the curse.

[39 : 14] That we bring all of our guilt and all of our shame into your presence, tainting your house. And we know that because of this, we should not be able to dwell in your presence. But we thank you that in the Lord Jesus, you have made a way to cleanse us and restore us to your presence.

And that in him, he reverses the curse. He shows how everything that is wrong with this world may be made right. Give us hearts and lives which love your presence and are drawn to Christ in worship and thankfulness.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.