

# Clean and Unclean

***“Depart, depart, go out from ... the lands of exile! Touch no unclean thing! Go out of the midst of her; cleanse yourselves and be clean, you who bear the vessels of the LORD.”***

***—Isaiah 52:11, The Amplified Bible***

**THE MATTER OF BEING** considered “clean” or “unclean” is an extremely important one in the Scriptures. These terms, in their various forms, appear more than five hundred times in the Bible, with a majority of them occurring in the Old Testament. Although often-times thought of as mostly applying to animals which either could, or could not, be used for food, the concept of

clean versus unclean is found in many other Scriptural teachings.

## **IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

God gave the Israelites various rules and regulations concerning clean and unclean animals. For example, concerning four-footed land animals, he said: “Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is cloven-footed, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat.” Other land animals, the Lord said, they were not to eat or even touch, “they are unclean to you.”—Lev. 11:3,8

Clean animals could become unclean to the children of Israel if they died of natural causes, or were

torn by wild beasts and died, or if they still had the blood within the flesh when prepared for food. The condition of uncleanness also extended to anyone who touched an unclean animal or object. This might even include things such as pots and cooking utensils, if they had not been properly washed prior to use.

From the natural standpoint, there were obviously practical reasons for some things to be considered clean and others unclean. However, God had an even greater purpose in mind with regard to Israel. He wanted his specially chosen people to be different from all other nations. He told them, “Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God, and the LORD hath chosen thee to be a peculiar people unto himself, above all the nations that are upon the earth.” (Deut. 14:2; 6:20-25; 7:6-9) The psalmist later wrote: “For the LORD hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure.”—Ps. 135:4

Wanting to be like the nations around them, Israel often resisted and disobeyed God’s instructions concerning these matters. Though these may have appeared as minor infractions to the people of Israel, God was using these somewhat simple aspects of everyday life as an important illustration. The greater meaning of the Lord’s instructions becomes clearer when we move from the consideration of animals to more important aspects of proper living.

## **IDOL WORSHIP—A FORM OF UNCLEANNESS**

Idol worship is a form of uncleanness which is especially displeasing to God. In the book of Genesis, even before there were Israelites, there is an example of defilement because of idols. God told Jacob to go to Bethel and erect an altar there. However, Jacob

could not immediately go because some in his family had been defiled through idol worship.—Gen. 35:1

“Then Jacob said unto his household, and to all that were with him, Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garment. And let us arise, and go up to Bethel; and I will make there an altar unto God. ... And they gave unto Jacob all the strange gods which were in their hand, and all their earrings which were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem.”—vss. 2-4

Later, when giving his law to Israel, God stated clearly the requirement that he alone should be worshipped, and that no manmade idols were to be made or revered. “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I [am] the LORD thy God.”—Exod. 20:3-5

## **LEPROSY—AN ILLUSTRATION**

Another kind of uncleanness during Old Testament times was the plague of leprosy. It was considered so serious that one of Israel’s priests was required to examine and diagnose a person who might have it. After following certain procedures, if the priest determined there was leprosy, he would announce it publicly, since it was very contagious: “He is a leprous man, he is unclean: the priest shall pronounce him utterly unclean.”—Lev. 13:44

Leprosy is used in the Bible as a picture of sin. There was very little the Israelite priest could do

about leprosy, except to pass judgment and isolate the leper from the rest of the population. The leper himself was required to announce his unclean condition to anyone who might approach near to him, so that there would be no risk of contact. Only later, where we have recorded certain miraculous healings of those with leprosy, do we begin to see how the cleansing of a leper is a picture of the cleansing of sinful man.

## **PURIFICATION**

Certain stipulations held true in the Old Testament with regard to clean versus unclean conditions. Uncleanliness could be transmitted to others, often merely by a touch. Cleanness, however, could not be given to others in such a way. It was not possible for someone who was clean to put his hands on the unclean and heal them. Rather, purification ceremonies were required. These usually involved three things: a waiting period of some duration, a cleansing agent, and a sacrifice or offering.

The Day of Atonement, one of Israel's annual feasts, was provided by God as a means to convey a special kind of cleansing. It was the annual cleansing from their national sins. In this ceremony, the sacrifice of a bullock and a goat took place, and blood was used as a symbolic cleansing agent. The details of this ceremony are recorded in the book of Leviticus, chapter 16. "On that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the LORD."—vs. 30

As part of the Day of Atonement, it is interesting to note how another animal, called the "scapegoat,"

or “live goat,” was to be handled. “Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat. ... And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited.”—vss. 8,21,22

This was not the only time when God instructed Israel to use a living animal to symbolically show the removal of uncleanness. In the ordinance for cleansing a leprous house, after taking two birds, and killing one, the priest was instructed to “let go the living bird out of the city into the open fields, and make an atonement for the house: and it shall be clean.”—Lev. 14:49-53

## **PURPOSE TO THESE INSTRUCTIONS**

Although God gave all these various rules and regulations to the children of Israel, there was nothing to stop the people from doing differently. In fact, their heathen neighbors mostly did everything the Jews were told expressly by God to not do. This caused Israel many problems, because they often looked upon their neighbors, and followed in their ways, rather than heeding the instructions of the Lord.

God repeatedly warned Israel against such waywardness. “Ye shall therefore keep all my statutes, and all my judgments, and do them: that the land, whither I bring you to dwell therein, spue you not out. And ye shall not walk in the manners of the nation, which I cast out before you; for they committed all these things, and therefore I abhorred them. ... I am the LORD your God, which have

separated you from other people. ... And ye shall be holy unto me: for I the LORD am holy.”—Lev. 20:22-24,26

The message was very clear. The Israelites needed to understand that they were different. They were to recognize the need to obey God. When, as individuals, they did that which was wrong, there were specific things they had to do to be cleansed. If they did not do them, they would be cut off from the rest of the nation. If, as a nation, Israel became unclean and did nothing about it, God would turn his face away from them. They would be unholy in his sight.

## **IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that all the ordinances God gave to Israel were a picture of something much greater. In them, Paul says, “We see a picture of the present time, in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered and yet are incapable of cleansing the ... worshipper. The ceremonies are concerned with food and drink, various washings and rules for bodily conduct, and were only intended to be valid until the time came when Christ should establish the truth. ... And if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a burnt heifer were, when sprinkled on the unholy, sufficient to make the body pure, then how much more will the blood of Christ himself, ... as the perfect sacrifice, purify your souls from the deeds of death, that you may serve the living God!”—Heb. 9:9,10,13,14, *J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English*

Elsewhere in the New Testament we are told: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit

the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God.” (I Cor. 6:9-11, *Revised Standard Version*) Examining the sins listed here, we find each one is founded upon weaknesses which favor self, or which seek the pleasure or advantage of our fallen flesh.

To call upon the power of God to purify us through the blood of Jesus is a requirement if we are to be cleansed from sin. However, if we think to somehow take advantage of God’s grace and mercy, while knowingly indulging in sin, hoping for justification “in” sin, instead of “from” sin, we deceive ourselves. Rather, the sentiments of our hearts, and our actions to the greatest possible extent, should continually be in opposition to unrighteousness and sin.

Along these lines, Paul wrote: “Be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love. ... But immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ... For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.”—Eph. 5:1-5,8, *RSV*

## **A CLEANSED CHURCH**

Concerning God's call and development of the church during this present Gospel Age, the apostle says: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."—Eph. 5:25-27, *RSV*

These verses present a word picture as to how the church becomes, and stays, clean in God's sight. Christ gave up his perfect human life, that through his blood we might be cleansed from Adamic sin and rescued from sin and death. In conjunction with this, the sanctifying influence associated with the daily "washing of water with the word," continues to purge and purify our hearts, if we are rightly exercised by the instructions and principles set forth in the Scriptures.

## **CHANGE MUST OCCUR**

It is well to note that the church's cleansing is not a passive exercise. If all the work were God's, then it would be his failure if any did not make their calling and election sure. As we look back at Israel's experiences, God surely did not fail them. They did not achieve that for which they were seeking, but it was not the fault of God. Rather, they constantly fell back into uncleanness and did little about it. Israel's failure to change their ways stands as a warning to us.

The Apostle Paul emphasizes the need for us to change. "I plead with you therefore, brethren, by



the compassions of God, to present all your faculties to Him as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to Him. ... Do not follow the customs of the present age, but be transformed by the entire renewal of your minds, so that you may learn by experience what God's will is—that will which is good and beautiful and perfect.”—Rom. 12:1,2, *Weymouth New Testament*

The Christian's sacrifice is not one of offering a literal dead beast upon an altar. We are to offer ourselves as a “living sacrifice.” In addition to that, there is the necessity for an inward change, a renovation and transformation of our heart and mind. Due to our fleshly imperfections, we often struggle, even in our best efforts. The things we should do, we at times do not do, and those things we should not do, we sometimes do. (Rom. 7:15) Like the ancient Israelites, we are constantly coming into contact with “dead bodies” and becoming unclean.

The proper course to follow at these times is to promptly seek forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings. The Apostle John instructs us: “If we freely admit that we have sinned, we find God utterly reliable and straightforward—he forgives our sins and makes us thoroughly clean from all that is evil. ... Remember that our advocate before the Father is Jesus Christ the righteous, the one who made personal atonement for our sins (and for those of the rest of the world as well). It is only when we obey God's laws that we can be quite sure that we really know him. The man who claims to know God but does not obey his laws is not only a liar but lives in self-delusion. In practice, the more a man learns to obey God's laws the more truly and

fully does he express his love for him.” (I John 1:9; 2:1-5, *Phillips*) Our lifelong goal must be to keep God’s commandments, applying the principles of the truth to our daily lives.

## **KEEPING OUR HEART CLEAN**

The Jews were taught by the law that there were certain unclean things which were never to enter their mouths. However, Jesus instructed his disciples, saying, “There is nothing outside a man which entering him can make him unclean; but it is the things which come out of a man that make him unclean.” (Mark 7:15, *Weymouth*) This particular teaching was so obscure to the disciples that they thought it was a parable, so they asked Jesus to clarify its meaning.

Jesus explained, saying, “Anything whatever that enters a man from outside cannot make him unclean, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and passes away ejected from him. ... What comes out of a man ... that it is which makes him unclean. For from within, out of men’s hearts, their evil purposes proceed—fornication, theft, murder, adultery, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, reviling, pride, reckless folly: all these wicked things come out from within and make a man unclean.”—vss. 18-23, *Weymouth*

The clear lesson for us is the need to be on guard about the motivations and intents of our heart. Those are the things which could defile us, if they are not pure. The Scriptures give us wise instruction in this regard: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.”—Prov. 4:23

## **A HOLY TEMPLE OF GOD**

In his first letter to the Corinthian brethren, Paul wrote: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? ... for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” (I Cor. 3:16,17) These words hearken back to the commandment given to the Israelites, and which was repeated to them on numerous occasions: “Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.”—Lev. 19:2

Paul, when reminding us of “the grace of God that bringeth salvation,” states that such a great favor from the Heavenly Father should teach us that, “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”—Tit. 2:11-14

God, through the Prophet Malachi, provides an interesting word picture depicting the cleansing of his symbolic temple, the church of the Gospel Age. “The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, ... behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.” Then the cleansing work is described. “He shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.”—Mal. 3:1,3

The word “purify” has the same meaning as clean or cleanse, as used in many of the Scriptures quoted earlier in this article. The “sons of Levi,”

who in Israel had no inheritance in the land, well represent those of the Gospel Age who have been called out of the darkness of this world into the marvelous light of truth. (I Pet. 2:9) These have given up their earthly inheritance and seek the kingdom of heaven. However, for this to be accomplished, they must be cleansed, purified, and purged, so that they may come forth as vessels of precious gold and silver, and offer to God “an offering in righteousness.” If we are humbly submissive to the purifying work of the Lord, we have the promise that we will be transformed into “a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.”—II Tim. 2:21

## **GOD’S GRACE**

God’s marvelous grace has touched us. He has cleansed us from what we were and is making us into something new—a New Creation. We quote the following passage: “The tears and sorrows and battlings in strife against the world, the flesh, and the devil are all very necessary in the present time; and we should neither hope nor expect to be crowned as victors without passing through such experiences. In the battle we learn not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think; we learn of our own weaknesses and imperfections and our need to walk closely with the Lord, if we would keep our garments unspotted from the world. We learn also to trust his grace, and that ‘our sufficiency is of God.’ We learn that ‘greater is he who is on our part than all they that be against us.’ We learn that the victory that overcometh the world is neither the strength and perfection of our flesh,

nor merely the strong resolution of our minds, but the latter helped and strengthened by him who assures us that his strength can be perfected in our weakness.”—*Songs in the Night*, January 10

The cleansing of the spiritual temple is only the start of the work of our Lord and Head, Christ Jesus. Soon, in God’s kingdom to be established upon the earth, the world of mankind will go through a similar process of purification. Of this, we read: “An highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.” (Isa. 35:8) The unclean will not “pass over” the way of holiness because they will be cleansed as they walk upon it, and as they render heart obedience to the great work being done on their behalf, and for their eternal benefit.

Let us remember that without holiness, which necessitates cleansing, “no man shall see the Lord.” (Heb. 12:14) Thus, we realize the great importance of being clean in God’s sight. Let us hold firmly our faith, and continue to keep our garments without “spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.” (Eph. 5:27) By so doing, we will receive an abundant entrance into the “everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—II Pet. 1:11 ■

*“Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ... Respect what is right in the sight of all men.”*

—Romans 12:16,17,

*New American Standard Bible*