

The Red Heifer

Numbers 19.

W. Kelly.

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In this chapter we have a most instructive ordinance of God, peculiar to the book of Numbers. "This is the ordinance of the law which Jehovah hath commanded, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer without spot, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke." What the great atonement-day is to the centre of the book of Leviticus, the red heifer is to the book of Numbers. Each seems characteristic of the book wherein they are given, which shows how systematic are the order and contents of Scripture.

Thus we have here a provision distinctly for the defilements which are met with as we journey through this world. This is of vital moment in practice. There is many a soul disposed to make the atonement do, as it were, all the work. There is no truth more blessed than the atonement, unless it be His person who gives that work its divine value; but we must leave room for all that our God has given us. There is nothing which so tends to make a sect as to take truth out of its proportions, treating a part as if it were the whole mind of God. It cannot be too much insisted upon, that the Bible is the book which delivers from all petty exclusiveness. What does it matter to have good thoughts here and right ways there, if there be along with this the essential vice of settling down contented with a part of God's mind to the rejection of the rest? Our place is carrying out the Lord's will, nothing but His will, and all His will, as far as we know it. Less than this gives up the glory of Christ. It is impossible to be sectarian where His word governs all; and there is no way of being unsectarian without it. Our being in this position or that will never make us individually and really unsectarian. The seeds of error go along with wretched self, from which there is no deliverance except by walking in the power of Christ dead and risen. This too applies here, where we have not merely the wrong of sectarianism, but the evil of thus abusing the most precious truths of God. When used exclusively, they will ere long turn into an excuse for sin, whatever the high assumptions of an earlier stage.

It will not do to confine the saint then even to Christ's atoning work, which has for ever abolished our guilt before God; not even if we add to this that we know that in Him risen we are placed in an entirely new position, a life where evil never enters. Both most true and precious; but are these the whole truth? Certainly not; and there is no course more dangerous than to construe them as the whole truth. They are as precious as they are needed for the soul; but there is really no part of truth which is not needed, and this largeness and openness to all truth is precisely what we have to insist on. Indeed I am persuaded that this is after all what is most peculiar — to avoid peculiarities and pet subjects, welcoming all truth by the grace of God. Not that one can say much if the question be, How far we have made it our own? but it is truly of God to be in a position where all truth is open to us and we to it, and which does not exclude a single fragment of God's mind and will. It will be impossible, I am assured, save on the ground of the assembly of God, to find a place which will not shut out truth, and perhaps much which is evidently most precious. It is well to guard sedulously another thing — that we

do not simply satisfy ourselves that we are on right ground according to God, but that our hearts earnestly desire to turn what He has given us always and only to the account of His glory.

The red heifer teaches the children of Israel on the surface of it that the work of the day of atonement had not so completely dealt with all sin that they might treat daily defilements as immaterial. It is impossible to exaggerate the value of the shedding of Christ's blood for our sins. It does give no more conscience of sins. We are justified by His blood; yea more, with Christ we have died to sin; and we are alive to God in Him. But though this is all quite true (and was then set forth imperfectly as far as figure could, when we look at an Israelite), such grace is the strongest motive why we cannot tamper with what is defiled. The very fact that we are cleansed perfectly before God is a loud call to us not to endure a blot before men. It was to guard His people from soils by the way that God gave here a provision so remarkable, "A red heifer" was to be brought "without spot, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came yoke," a striking picture of Christ, but of Christ in a way not often spoken of in Scripture. The requirement supposes not only the absence of such blemishes as was indispensable in every sacrifice; but here expressly also it must have never known the yoke, that is, the pressure of sin. How this speaks of the antitype! Christ was always perfectly acceptable unto God. "And ye shall give her to Eleazar the priest that he may bring her forth without the camp, and one shall slay her before his face."

The blood was taken and put seven times before the tabernacle. It was quite right that the connection should be kept up with the great truth of the blood that makes atonement, and that vindicates God wherever the thought of sin occurs. But its special use points to another feature. The sprinkling of the blood is the continual witness of the truth of sacrifice; but the characteristic want follows. "And one shall burn the heifer in his sight; her skin, and her flesh, and her blood, with her dung, shall he burn. And the priest shall take cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet, and cast it into the midst of the burning of the heifer." Then we find the ashes of the heifer laid up in a clean place. "And a man that is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, and lay them up without the camp in a clean place, and it shall be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel for a water of separation; it is a purification for sin." In what sense? Simply and solely with a view to communion, i.e. of restoring it when broken. It is not at all a question of establishing relationships (that was already done), but on the ground of the subsisting relation the Israelite must allow nothing by the way which would sully the holiness that suits the sanctuary of Jehovah. This was the point.

Such is the true standard as set forth in this type. It is not merely the law of Jehovah condemning this or that. This shadow of good things demanded separation from anything inconsistent with the sanctuary. The form which this ordinance took was in respect of travelling through the wilderness, where they were exposed constantly to the contact of death. It is death that is here brought in as defiling in various shapes and degrees. Supposing one touched the dead body of a man, he shall be unclean seven days. What was to be done? "He shall purify himself with it on the third day, and on the seventh day he shall be clean: but if he purify not himself the third day, then the seventh day he shall not be clean." It was not permitted to purify one's self on the first day. Am I wrong in thinking *à priori* we might have thought this haste much the best course? Why not at once? It was ordered not for the first but the third day. When there is defilement on the spirit, when anything succeeds in interrupting communion with God, it is of deep moral importance that we should thoroughly realize our offence.

This seems the meaning of its being done on the third day. It was to be no mere sudden feeling that one had sinned, and there was an end of the matter. The Israelite was obliged to remain till the third day under a sense of his sin. This was a painful position. He had to reckon up the days, and remain till the third, when he has the water of separation first sprinkled on him. "In the mouth of two or

three witnesses" (the well-known provision in every case) "every word shall be established." Thus we see he who had come in contact with death must remain an adequate time to show the deliberate sense of it, and must take the place of one that was defiled before God. A hasty expression of sorrow does not prove genuine repentance for sin. We see something like this with children. There is many a one who has a child ready enough to ask for forgiveness, or even own its fault; but the child that feels it most is not always quick. A child who is far slower to own it may have, and commonly has, a deeper sense of what confession means. However, I am not now speaking of the natural character; but I say that it is right and becoming (and this I believe to be the general meaning of the Lord's ordinance here) that he who is defiled (that is, has his communion with God interrupted) should take that place seriously. Of course, in Christianity it is not a question of days, but of that which corresponds to the meaning; which is that there should be time enough to prove a real sense of the evil of one's defilement as dishonouring God and His sanctuary, and not the haste which really evinces an absence of right feeling. He who duly purified himself on the third day was in effect purified on the seventh day.

Thus, first of all, he has a sense of his sin in the presence of this grace that provides against it; then, he has at last the precious realization of grace in the presence of sin. The two sprinklings are one the converse of the other. They set forth how sin had brought shame on grace, and how grace had triumphed over sin. This seems the meaning, and more particularly for the following reason. The ashes of the heifer express the effect of the consuming judgment of God on the Lord Jesus because of sin. It is not simply blood showing that I am guilty, and that God gives a sacrifice to put it away. The ashes attest the judicial dealing of God in the consumption, as it were, of that blessed offering which came under all the holy sentence of God through our sins. The water (or Spirit by the word) gives us to realise Christ's having suffered for that which we, alas! are apt to feel so little, if not to trifle with it.

There is another thing to notice in passing. The water of purification was not merely wanted when one touched a dead body, but in different modes and measures. That might be called a great case, but the institution shows that God takes notice of the least thing. So should we — at least in ourselves. "This is the law, when a man dieth in a tent; all that come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days. And every open vessel, which hath no covering bound upon it, is unclean. And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man; or a grave, shall be unclean seven days." "The bone of a man" might be a much lesser object, but whatever defiles comes into notice, and is provided for in Christ our Lord. Thus God would habituate us to the nicest discernment and the most thorough self-judgment. It is not only grave matters that defile, but little occasions, as men would say, which come between us and communion with our God and Father. At the same time He provides the unchanging remedy of grace for every defilement.

W. K.

THE THIRD AND SEVENTH DAYS

Numbers 19

(An unexpected taste of J N Darby! — bound with the above in a pamphlet.)

Of the use of the third day and the seventh day in Numbers 19: 12, 1 should not give any very dogmatically certain interpretation, drawing its meaning more from the experiences pointed to by the figure than from directly scriptural proofs. "Third" is little used in scripture as a number to which meaning is attached; it is, however, somewhat as that which is beyond two. Two seems to import

completeness by corroboration in witness; the third more than enough, and hence, also, what leave the previous state whose witness is complete. It is here used, I believe, only as a division of seven.

But the moral bearing I apprehend is this. The red heifer was a provision for defilement in the way — hence introduced into the book of Numbers, not in Leviticus. Its use was not to found communion by blood (though that groundwork was first laid and perfectly laid, in that the blood was sprinkled seven times there where Jehovah was to meet the people), but to restore communion interrupted by defilement. The sign (the ashes) of sin having been consumed long ago, was put into running water, and the unclean sprinkled with it the third day. For two days he lay under the uncleanness — must feel it as such. There was no haste in restoration to communion till the privation of it (and thus the uncleanness of sin) was felt. Then in the water (the application by the word in the power of the Holy Ghost), the sense that the sin (which interrupted communion) was put away before God, was given after the full witness, in the soul, of the evil. The man was brought out of it in the sense of the grace that put it away, and that cleansed from it; and connected the sense of sin, not with the bitterness of lost communion, but with the grace that had put it away: giving a deeper and more justifying sense of it in connection with grace, making us judge it with God in grace; not in the sense of being, as to enjoyment, without Him, and the Holy Ghost a reprover.

Still, this is not communion; it is not the soul occupied with God without the conscience having to be exercised, but the — conscience in exercise, though now no longer a bad one, but in a renewed sense of grace and goodness. judging the evil thence, one is in a sense purified, but not so as to be peacefully in communion with God; enjoying Christ for His own precious excellences, which we do in communion. When the full work is wrought; when this purifying is complete, and grace in respect of sin is fully entered into, — then, communion is entered into which leaves sin and all thoughts about it behind. The grace that has purified, in making us judge sin according to grace, makes us now enjoy grace without any more thinking of sin — in a word, enjoy God. Communion is restored, and, in the full acceptableness of the offering of Christ, understood and enjoyed. I enter into the presence of, and communion with, God — sin, as the subject of my thoughts, being wholly left behind. This is the seventh day. All is complete.

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