

Unclean! Unclean!

or, Childbirth, leprosy as symbols & signs of sin

... they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it; and nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it ... — REVELATION 21:26,27

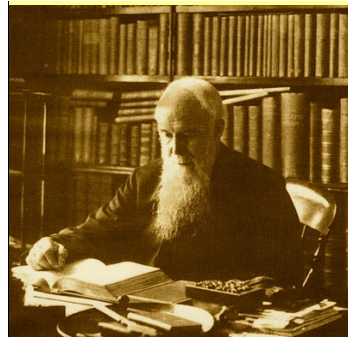
Analysis

A. (12:1-8) A very un-politically correct – and unsentimental – view of birth

[chapters 12-15] While chap. 11 deals with uncleanness that is outside humans in the external world, chaps. 12-15 deal more with uncleanness found within the human constitution itself and not in the outside environment. The problem of cleanness for a holy people is not merely contact with the external world, but also pollution that comes from within. [Kaiser 1084]

[12:2] This ceremony had reference to two points; for, first, the Jews were reminded by it of the common corruption of our nature; and secondly, the remedy of the evil was set before them. There is little difficulty in understanding why a woman who has conceived and given birth to a child, should be pronounced unclean; viz., because the whole race of Adam is polluted and defiled, so that the woman already contracts uncleanness from the offspring which she bears in the womb, and is further contaminated by giving it birth. Hence it appears how foul and disgusting in God's sight is our condition, since at our birth, and even before it, we infect our mothers. ... Hence the error of Pelagius is clearly refuted, who denied that the sin of Adam was propagated among his descendants, and pretended that we contracted sin from our parents not by origin, but by imitation. For the mother would not be unclean if the children were pure and free from all defilement. Therefore God would by this rite teach His ancient people that all men are born accursed, and bring into the world with them an hereditary corruption which pollutes their very mothers. [Calvin i 498]

[12:1,2] The woman is made unclean by the birth of a child. Why is this? Because the child is born a sinner, an heir of hell! She that bare him is therefore held as



JOHN CHARLES RYLE
(1816-1900)

No one has written a more
soul-scouring book than Ryle's
Holiness – truly a brillo pad for
the spirit

unclean. So decided is the Lord's view of the sin of a new-born babe. She continues unclean for seven days, until the time come when her son is to be recognised as received into the visible Church by circumcision. This attests that the babe is born out of covenant, and so refers us back to Adam, outside of Eden. "Thy first father hath sinned" (Isa. 43:27), is the fact brought to their mind. Adam's imputed guilt rests on his posterity. [Bonar 235]

[12:4-8] To the meaning of these regulations, the key is found in the same conceptions which we have seen to underlie the law concerning issues. In the birth of a child, the special original curse against the woman is regarded by the law as reaching its fullest, most consummate and significant expression. For the extreme evil of the state of sin into which the first woman, by that first sin, brought all womanhood, is seen most of all in this, that now woman, by means of those powers given her for good and blessing, can bring into the world only a child of sin. And it is, apparently, because we here see the operation of this curse in its most conspicuous form, that the time of her enforced separation from the tabernacle worship is prolonged to a period of forty or eighty days. It has been usual to speak of the time of the mother's uncleanness, and subsequent continued exclusion from the tabernacle worship, as being doubled in the case of the birth of a daughter; but it were, perhaps, more accurate to regard the normal length of these periods as being respectively fourteen and eighty days, of which the former is double of that required in 15:28. This normal period would then be more properly regarded as shortened by one half in the case of a male child, in virtue of his circumcision on the eighth day. [Kellogg 314]

[12:4,5,7] Both Wenham and Kaiser are careful to point out that it is the discharge which makes the woman unclean, not specifically the child or the birth itself.

[12:4-8] And yet many, who surely can think but superficially upon the solemn facts of life, still object to this most strenuously, that even the new-born child should be regarded as in nature sinful and unclean. Difficulty here we must all admit – difficulty so great that it is hard to overstate it – regarding the bearing of this fact on the character of the holy and merciful God, who in the beginning made man. And yet, surely, deeper thought must confess that herein the Mosaic view of infant nature – a view which is assumed and taught throughout Holy Scripture – however humbling to our natural pride, is only in strictest accord with what the admitted principles of the most exact science compel us to admit. For whenever, in any case, we find all creatures of the same class doing, under all circumstances, any one thing, we conclude that the reason for this can only lie in the nature of such creatures, antecedent to any influence of a tendency to imitation. If, for instance, the ox everywhere and always eats the green thing of the earth, and not flesh, the reason, we say, is found simply in the nature of the ox as he comes into being. So when we see all men, everywhere, under all circumstances, as soon as ever they come to the time of free moral choice, always choosing and committing sin, what can we conclude – regarding this, not as a theological, but merely as a scientific question – but that man, as he comes into the world, must have a sinful nature? And this being so, then why must not the law of heredity apply, according to which, by a law which knows of no exceptions, like ever produces its like? [Kellogg 325]

[12:4] I know not whether the view is sound which some take, that the mother is more

Do believers today *really*
believe their children are born
outside the covenant
– “heirs of hell”?

defiled by female offspring, because there is more disposition to vice in this sex. Perhaps, it is more probable, as some think, that it was because the woman was the beginning of the rebellion, when, being deceived by the serpent, she destroyed her husband with her, and drew her posterity into the same ruin. But it seems more correct to me that the punishment in regard to males was lightened and diminished by circumcision. For although in that symbol God consecrated both sexes, yet He honored males with special favor, by engraving His covenant on their flesh. Wherefore, also, He expressly mentions their circumcision, whereby a dignity was imparted to them, which rendered them superior to females. [Calvin i 501]

(12:3) The symbolism of circumcision – and the number 8

[12:3] Although the rite of circumcision here receives a new and special sanction, it had been appointed long before by God as the sign of His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:10-14). Nor was circumcision, probably, even then a new thing. That the ancient Egyptians practised it is well known; so also did the Arabs and Phoenicians; ... The fundamental idea connected with circumcision, by most of the peoples who have practised it, appears to have been physical purification; indeed, the Arabs call it by the name *tatur*, which has this precise meaning. And it deserves to be noticed that for this idea regarding circumcision there is so much reason in fact, that high medical authorities have attributed to it a real hygienic value, especially in warm climates. [Kellogg 315]

[12:3] See Harrison [134] for the medical benefits of the 8th day law, both to restrict pain and hemorrhage, and to serve as a preventive to later infections and even cancer.

[12:3] Why was the eighth day selected...? The answer is to be found in the symbolic significance of the eighth day. As the old creation was completed in six days, with a following Sabbath of rest, so that six is ever the number of the old creation, as under imperfection and sin; the eighth day, which is the first day of a new week, everywhere in Scripture appears as the number symbolic of the new creation, in which all things shall be restored in the great redemption through the Second Adam. The thought finds its fullest expression in the resurrection of Christ, as the First-born from the dead, the Beginning and the Lord of the new creation, who in His resurrection-body manifested the first-fruits in physical life of the new creation, rising from the dead on the first, or, in other words, the day after the seventh, the eighth day. This gives the key to the use of the number eight in the Mosaic symbolism. Thus in the law of the cleansing of the man or the woman that had an issue, the sacrifices which effectuated their formal deliverance from the curse under which, through the weakness of their old nature, they had suffered, were to be offered on the eighth day (15:14,29); the priestly cleansing of the leper from the taint of his living death was also effected on the eighth day (14:10); so also the cleansing of the Nazirite who had been defiled by the dead (Numb. 6:10). So also the holy convocation which closed the feast of tabernacles or ingathering – the feast which, as we shall see, typically prefigured the great harvest of which Christ was the First-fruits – was ordained, in like manner, for the eighth day (23:36). With good reason, then, was circumcision ordered for the eighth day, seeing that what it symbolically signified was precisely this: the putting off of the flesh with which we are born through the circumcision of Christ, and therewith the first beginning of a new and purified nature – a change so profound and radical,

Why the 8th day for the sign of circumcision?

and in which the Divine efficiency is so immediately concerned, that Paul said of it that if any man was in Christ, in whose circumcision we are circised (Col. 2:11), "there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17, margin, R.V.). [Kellogg 318-320]

[12:8] Kidner [118] connects this passage with Luke 2:21-39, where the obedience of the parents of Messiah to Moses illustrates that great truth of which Paul spoke, that Christ was born "born of a woman, born under the Law" (Gal. 4:4).

B. (13:1-44) The necessity of vigilance for both people and priest

[12-15] In the decomposition which follows death, the effect of sin, of which death is the wages, is made manifest in the body. Decomposition, as the embodiment of the unholy nature of sin, is uncleanness ... and this the Israelite, who was called to sanctification in fellowship with God, was to avoid and abhor. Hence the human corpse produced the greatest amount of defilement; so great, in fact, that to remove it a sprinkling water was necessary, which had been strengthened by the ashes of a sin-offering into a kind of sacred alkali. Next to the corpse, there came on the one hand leprosy, that bodily image of death which produced all the symptoms of decomposition even in the living body, and on the other hand the offensive secretions from the organs of generation, which resemble the putrid secretions that are the signs in the corpse of the internal dissolution of the bodily organs and the commencement of decomposition. From the fact that the impurities, for which special rites of purification were enjoined, are restricted to these three forms of manifestation in the human body, it is very evident that the laws of purification laid down in the O.T. were not regulations for the promotion of cleanliness or of good morals and decency, that is to say, were not police regulations for the protection of the life of the body from contagious diseases and other things injurious to health; but that their simple object was "to impress upon the mind a deep horror of everything that is and is called death in the creature, and thereby to foster an utter abhorrence of everything that is or is called sin, and also, to the constant humiliation of fallen man, to remind him in all the leading processes of the natural life-generation, birth, eating, disease, death - how everything, even his own bodily nature, lies under the curse of sin (Genesis 3:14-19), that so the law might become a 'schoolmaster to bring unto Christ,' and awaken and sustain the longing for a Redeemer from the curse which had fallen upon his body also (see Galatians 3:24; Romans 7:24; Romans 8:19; Philemon 3:21)." [Keil, quoting Leyrer, ii 374]

The same Saviour who said 'Allow the little children to come to me ...' also wept over the multitudes of children who would die because of the contagion of community sin

[13:2] Indeed it is probable that, since heathen writers knew that the Jewish people suffered from this disease, they laid hold of it as the ground of their falsehood, that all the descendants of Abraham were infected with the itch, and were driven away from Egypt, lest others should catch it from them. That this was an ancient calumny appears from Josephus, both in the ninth book of his Antiquities, and in his Treatise against Apion; and it is repeated both by C. Tacitus and Justin. Yet I make no doubt that the Egyptians, a very proud nation, in order to efface the memory of their own disgrace, and of the vengeance inflicted upon them by God, invented this lie, and thus grossly turned against this innocent people what had happened to themselves,

when they were smitten with boils and blains. But we shall see hereafter, amongst God's curses, that He chastised His people with the same plagues as He had inflicted on the Egyptians: "The Lord will smite thee with the botch of Egypt, and with the emerods, and with the scab," etc. (Deuteronomy 28:27.) [Calvin ii 13]

[13:3] Leprosy is also corrosive, and penetrates unseen – almost unfelt – till it has wasted the substance: like sin in the soul, eating out its beauty and its very life, while outwardly the sinner moves about as before. At length it bursts forth externally, too – the man becomes a skeleton, and a mass of noisome corruption. So does sin at length deface the whole image of God, and every faint vestige of comeliness that was left. And death is the sure end. [Bonar 240]

C. (13:45-46) Living death for the leper – a type of sin's effect

[13:45,46] I know not whether the opinion of some is a sound one, that they were enjoined to cover the mouth or lip, lest by the infection of their breath they should injure others. My own view is rather, that because they were civilly dead, they also bore the symbol of death in having the face covered — as their separation deprived them of the ordinary life of men. [Calvin ii 17]

[13:45,46] He must go with clothes rent, with his hair neglected, his lip covered, crying, "Unclean! unclean!" without the camp, and there abide alone for so long as he continues to be afflicted with the disease. In other words, he is to assume all the ordinary signs of mourning for the dead; he is to regard himself, and all others are to regard him, as a dead man. As it were, he is a continual mourner at his own funeral. [Kellogg 333]

[13:46] As I was approaching Jerusalem, I was startled by the sudden apparition of a crowd of beggars, sans eyes, sans nose, sans hair, sans everything.... They held up their handless arms, unearthly sounds gurgled through throats without palates, – in a word, I was horrified. ... It comes on by degrees in different parts of the body: the hair falls from the head and eyebrows; the nails loosen, decay, and drop off; joint after joint of the fingers and toes shrinks up and slowly falls away; the gums are absorbed, and the teeth disappear; the nose, the eyes, the tongue, and the palate are slowly consumed; and, finally, the wretched victim sinks into the earth and disappears. [missionary William Thomson *The Land and the Book* i 530-31]

[13:46] Wenham [201] points to the symbolic as well as social stigma of the leper's banishment "outside the camp". The tabernacle, he notes, was the place assigned to the Lord's holy workers. The people lived in the camp adjacent to and surrounding the holy place (which was rendered holy by the very presence of God Himself). Thus the people were holy by contact with the holy. But he who was thrust "outside the camp" was thus out of contact with the Holy One and the holy people too. Just as Adam & Eve were sentenced to a living death when expelled from Eden.



D. (13:47-59) Keeping sin and death before the eyes of all

[13:58] He has indeed subjected woolen garments and furs to the ravages of the moth, and vessels of various kinds to rust, and other corruptions; in fact, has surrounded the human race with rottenness, in order that everywhere our eyes should light on the punishment of sin ... [Calvin ii 18]

[13:59] In the first place, leprosy is undoubtedly selected to be a special type of sin, on account of its extreme loathsomeness. Beginning, indeed, as an insignificant spot, "a bright place," a mere scale on the skin, it goes on spreading, progressing ever from worse to worse, till at last limb drops from limb, and only the hideous mutilated remnant of what was once a man is left. ... Too horrible is this to be repeated or thought of? Yes! But then all the more solemnly instructive is it that the Holy Spirit should have chosen this disease, the most loathsome of all, as the most fatal of all, to symbolise to us the true nature of that spiritual malady which affects us all, as it is seen by the omniscient and most holy God. [Kellogg 337]

[13:55] It is another mark of leprosy that sooner or later it affects the whole man; and in this, again, appears the sad fitness of the disease to stand as a symbol of sin. For sin is not a partial disorder, affecting only one class of faculties, or one part of our nature. It disorders the judgment; it obscures our moral perceptions; it either perverts the affections, or unduly stimulates them in one direction, while it deadens them in another; it hardens and quickens the will for evil, while it paralyses its power for the volition of that which is holy. And not only the Holy Scripture, but observation itself, teaches us that sin, in many cases, also affects the body of man, weakening its powers, and bringing in, by an inexorable law, pain, disease, and death. Sooner or later, then, sin affects the whole man. And for that reason, again, is leprosy set forth as its pre-eminent symbol. It is another remarkable feature of the disease that, as it progresses from bad to worse, the victim becomes more and more insensible. This numbness or insensibility of the spots affected – in one most common variety at least – is a constant feature. In some cases it becomes so extreme that a knife may be thrust into the affected limb, or the diseased flesh may be burnt with fire, and yet the leper feels no pain. Nor is the insensibility confined to the body, but, as the leprosy extends, the mind is affected in an analogous manner. A recent writer says: "Though a mass of bodily corruption, at last unable to leave his bed, the leper seems happy and contented with his sad condition." Is anything more characteristic than this of the malady of sin? The sin which, when first committed, costs a keen pang, afterward, when frequently repeated, hurts not the conscience at all. Judgments and mercies, which in earlier life affected one with profound emotion, in later life leave the impenitent sinner as unmoved as they found him. Hence we all recognise the fitness of the common expression, "a seared conscience," as also of the Apostle's description of advanced sinners as men who are "past feeling" (Eph. 4:19). Of this moral insensibility which sin produces, then, we are impressively reminded when the Holy Spirit in the Word holds before us leprosy as a type of sin. [Kellogg 339-40]

[13:59] In view of all these correspondences, one need not wonder that in the symbolism of the law leprosy holds the place which it does. For what other disease can be named which combines in itself, as a physical malady, so many of the most characteristic marks of the malady of the soul? In its intrinsic loathsomeness, its insignificant beginnings, its slow but inevitable progress, in the extent of its effects, in the insensibility which accompanies it, in its hereditary character, in its incurability, and, finally, in the fact that according to the law it involved the banishment of the leper from the camp of Israel, – in all these respects, it stands alone as [Kellogg 343]

[13:59] The law did not make an artificial distinction between physical well-being and

spiritual vitality, exalting one at the expense of the other, but required that the true Israelite should be an integrated person whose spirituality involved all areas of his life. ... The pursuit of holiness under the guidance of God's spirit is mandatory if the Christian is to grow truly into the fullness of Christ. [Harrison 147-48]

[summarizing the lesson – the inner leprosy] We are ever ready to take home the guilt of evil deeds, but to palliate the evil of a depraved heart. But the Lord reverses the case. His severest judgment is reserved for inward depravity. He hates Sodom's lewdness and open vice; but he hates yet more Bethsaida's heart of unbelief, wherein, as on a couch, all Sodom's vice could softly repose within its inner chamber. And yet more. Is it not when a soul is fully sensible of entire corruption, as Isa.1:5, that salvation is nearest? A complete Saviour for a complete sinner? [Bonar 247]

“... a perfect type of sin; it is sin, as it were, made visible in the flesh.”