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This week at MRC we continued our series in Numbers by stopping off in chapter 19 - at first glance an unusual chapter out longing how to undertake a particular sacrifice that would produce 'the water of purification' - a way of dealing with resulting uncleanness that contact with a corpse or dead body would produce.

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We began our time by talking about the 'Lady Macbeth Effect' - a concept proven to show how internal moral uncleanness can be tied up for some people with a feeling of external dirt. So with Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play as she feels bloodstained hands because of her part in killing the King of Scotland.

We also spent time considering the importance of understanding the Old Testament. It's there that we are introduced to the ideas, concepts and structures that help us to properly understand and grasp what's happening in the New Testament. To neglect the Old leaves us misunderstanding the New.

There were a number of unique factors and details in Numbers 19 (as well as a few common ones) worth noting as we seek to understand its relevance for us.

The first was that the sacrifice was very RED. It's only here that we encounter a red heifer being specified - along with the need for scarlet wool, cedar wood and for the animal's blood to be burnt. Combine this with the burning of hyssop and the result is a red cleansing combination. We also noted that the sacrifice and burning of the heifer was unusually to happen outside the camp - in a place of disgrace and uncleanness. We also saw that the role of the priest in this sacrifice is interesting - the priest undertaking the sacrifice becomes dirty (so the people might be clean) but later is also not needed. Anyone ceremonially clean can produce and provide the water of purification.

It was also noteworthy in v9 that the description of the resulting sacrifice was for the purification of sins. Which was interesting because there is really no other mention of sin in the chapter (some versions do in v17 but it's talking about the same idea). It's much more a chapter about uncleanness from contact with death. We noted though that sin and

death in the scriptures go hand in hand. Ever since Eden when Adam and Eve sinned and walked out on the God of life, so sin and death have been intertwined. That would be especially pertinent and painful for this Numbers generation. Each death they encounter in the Wilderness would be a painful reminder of their sin against the Lord on the edge of the land as they did not trust him to provide.

After the burning of the red heifer (and other red products) the resulting ashes could then be added to water to give the water of purification needed to make clean anyone made unclean by coming into contact with a corpse. No further sacrifice or priest or offering was required - it had all been done. We likened it to instant coffee (good instant coffee!) - all the roasting and filtering and pressing has happened - all that's now needed is an addition of water.

We then turned to Hebrews 9:13-14 to see how the writer there highlighted how Jesus' sacrifice was better than these OT sacrifices. The OT sacrifices cleansed the Israelites on the outside - Jesus is infinitely better because he cleanses people from within.

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As always take these questions as adapt / ignore as appropriate for your group.

- What can you remember so far in Numbers? Highlights / lowlights etc
- Can you associate with the Lady Macbeth Effect? Why do you think it seems to be real?
- Re-tell the different aspects of this sacrifice.
- What did this sacrifice do?
- Why are sin and death so tightly linked up?
- Why would death be such an issue for the Wilderness generation?
- What might it remind them of?
- How fundamentally do these sacrifices work / not work? Why do we need Jesus?!
- List the different aspects of the sacrifice in this ch that point us to the sacrifice of Christ.
- What would you say to a Christian struggling with constant feeling of uncleanness / dirt?