

# The cleansing you need

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[ 0 : 00 ] Thanks very much, Daniel.

Can I encourage you to keep your Bibles open in front of you? And there's also a sermon outline in the bulletin. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, I just pray now that as your word has been read, and as I come to preach it, I pray that indeed you would take your word and put it deep into our hearts and cause us to marvel again at the Lord Jesus and to live for him.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen. Well, as Daniel was reading through Numbers 19, I wonder if you're thinking, oh no, not again. Not another chapter of rules and rituals from thousands of years ago that are completely meaningless to me.

Well, my hope is that even if you thought that, you're also thinking. But this is God's word, so it's always relevant. I don't have to make it relevant, I just have to uncover its relevance.

So I'm ready to dig deeper. That's the attitude I hope we have. And to begin with, I'm going to start with a subject that is relevant to all humans everywhere, in every culture, in every century.

[ 1 : 27 ] Death. Now in theory, we know that death is everywhere. Just curl up on the sofa with Netflix this Friday, or go to the cinema this weekend, and you'll soon be watching something that probably features somebody dying, probably violently.

Read the local news, and you'll probably read of a toddler dying because his forgetful grandpa left him in the car seat and forgot to take him out, or a family perishing in a road accident on the highway, or an arbitrary of a famous singer who's lost her battle with cancer.

Read the global news, And you might hear of 50 people killed when yet another hospital is bombed in Syria, or an Ebola outbreak starts to claim lives in the Congo, or a YouTube star commits suicide. In fact, your lives have likely been personally touched by death. Maybe a loved one has passed on, perhaps even very recently.

When I was 12, I used to visit a sick classmate of mine with a few friends regularly, and to watch him deteriorate before our very eyes, and then die of leukemia, was very painful.

[ 2 : 48 ] When I was based in KL, the pastor of some of the students I taught in a Bible class, went missing, and was eventually discovered murdered by armed robbers.

Just a few weeks ago, a friend of friends, a young man in his final year at uni, collapsed and died while running in a marathon.

Death, when you think about it, is everywhere. It surrounds us. It's pervasive. And that's our entryway into Numbers 19.

You see, though these people lived thousands of years ago, in this respect, their world is no different. Death is everywhere. It surrounds them. It's pervasive.

What's different is that it's more in your face. You see, the last time we saw the Israelites, they were rebelling. You might remember from two weeks ago, that Korah, a Levite, along with certain Reubenites, tried to lead an uprising against God's appointed leaders, Moses and Aaron.

[ 4 : 00 ] They even blasphemously called Egypt, the land of milk and honey, and they defied God. So they paid the price. Numbers 16, verse 33, tells us that they were swallowed up by death itself.

But the people still grumbled. And so a plague starts. But by the time Aaron comes to make atonement for them, verse 49 tells us that they were 14,700 dead bodies from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah.

There's a lot of dead bodies. I've been reading about the Rwandan genocide back in the 1990s. The journalist I'm reading, Philip Gurevich, tells of a time where he stepped into a church where many of the Tootsie people had been slaughtered.

As he went through the first room, and then another, and another, he could see them filled with dead bodies. And so he went outside to the garden, presumably just to compose himself, when he

heard a crunch.

His companion, a retired Canadian soldier, had stumbled, and his foot had rolled onto a skull, accidentally breaking it. Now this is what the journalist said.

[ 5 : 29 ] Emotions rose within me, and I felt a small but keen anger at this man. Shouldn't he try to be more respectful? Then I heard another crunch, and felt a vibration underfoot.

I had stepped on a skull too. There were just too many dead bodies. He couldn't avoid them. It was everywhere. And that's how it was for the Israelites.

Everywhere they turned, death was there. And that's why death is such a preoccupation in Numbers chapter 19. I wonder if you noticed it.

There's plenty of references to human corpses. For instance, in verses 11 and 13. There's stuff about people dying natural or violent deaths, in verse 16.

There's talk about human bones and graves. For instance, in verse 18. And even in the first half of Numbers 19, we have the death of a hiver or cow.

[ 6 : 41 ] Death is pervasive. That's their reality. And if so, that means Israel has a very big problem.

One that we might not immediately understand. You see, apart from corpses and graves and other words associated with death, there's another word that keeps popping up as you read through Numbers 19.

I'm sure you picked it up. It's unclean. Just look at verse 11 for example. Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days.

And that's a huge problem. But why? After all, if we got a little smudge on our face from eating too much chocolate, or got a little mud on our shirt from playing too much football, we just shrug it off. Sure, we're a little unclean, but it's no big deal. And even if we were to touch a corpse today, and given how many people we have working at SGH in this congregation, it's quite possible you might be sitting next to someone who's done precisely that.

[ 8 : 00 ] Well, even if you were to touch a corpse, well, it might make us feel unsettled. But I don't think we'll see it as a life-defining problem. But for the Israelites, this kind of ceremonial uncleanness, the kind you get when you get in touch with a dead body, is a big deal.

What happens when you're unclean? It means you can't fellowship with God. You can't fellowship with God's people. Your condition renders you unfit to come into contact with them.

And actually, even today, we kind of know this. What happens if I were to consume a lot of stinky tofu and then approach my wife afterwards?

She sends me away. She can't bear for me to talk to her. I'm unclean. And until I get clean again, well, there's no way I'm getting into contact with her. Or think about your kids coming to the dinner table with unwashed hands after using the toilet.

Well, they're not welcome until their hands are washed and sanitized. You see, being unclean means I lose access to the one who loves me.

[ 9 : 27 ] Being unclean means I am not welcome to eat and talk and laugh with others. And so when the Israelites come into contact with death and become unclean, they cannot access the God who loves them.

For God gives life and death takes away life. The two cannot coexist. And so when the Israelites are touched by death, they cannot come into the presence of the living God.

If they enter and defile the tabernacle, they will be struck down. But now you begin to see the problem. How are they going to avoid being unclean when death is everywhere?

According to research presented at a recent microbiology conference, it doesn't take much for viruses to spread in your average office. Only two to four hours after a carrier has touched a single doorknob or tabletop, viruses were present on more than half of the workers and visitors in the building as well as more than half of the surfaces that they would commonly touch.

The worst viral hotspot, in case you're wondering, is the pantry where you make your coffee. And in this chapter, it's so, so easy to become unclean, isn't it?

[ 11 : 06 ] It's like a virus. Just look at verse 14. This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent. Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days and every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean.

So if you happen to be visiting someone in his home and his aging grandpa suddenly topples over and dies, well, that's it. You're unclean. In fact, the container of kueh that you brought as a present is now unclean too.

And it doesn't matter how the people died. In verse 16, it doesn't matter if they died of a violent or natural death. If you touch them, you're unclean. And it doesn't really matter who you are. In an office, the virus doesn't care if you are the CEO or just the janitor. It infects both. And in Israel, it doesn't matter if you're the priest.

Look what happens after he offers an animal sacrifice. Verse 7. After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening.

[12:32] His assistant doesn't escape either. Verse 8. The man who burns the sacrifice must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening.

So even if you're the so-called most spiritual person in the community, well, you can still be unclean. No one is free from this contamination. Everyone needs to be cleansed.

Numbers 19 insists on this. And just before we dive back into the passage, I want us to realise that this is still true here in Kuching in the 21st century.

You see, death continues to be pervasive in our world. Perhaps the only difference is that we simply hide it better. As recently as 1945, most deaths occurred at home.

It was more up close and personal. And yet, by the end of the 20th century, nearly 80% of deaths occurred in an institutional setting, whether in a hospital or a nursing home or some other facility.

[13:51] Now, that's a statistic from the Western world, but I don't think Malaysia will be hugely different. Due to industrialisation and medical advances, encounters with death and corpses become removed from the ordinary person to specialists and surgeons and so on.

Now, on one level, that's a good thing. It means many more people survive than was the case previously. But the result is that death now becomes a distant reality for many.

The historian Philip Aris, tracking these changes, says, the dying are pushed out of sight because society cannot endure their presence.

But just because it's hidden doesn't mean it's not there. Just because we don't know anybody who died of rabies doesn't mean there's no outbreak.

And the pervasiveness of death in our world points to a deeper problem. For God has made clear why we are all touched by death.

[15:06] In the Old Testament, Ezekiel 18 verse 20 says this, the one who sins is the one who will die. In the New Testament, James 1 verse 15 reminds us, sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death.

And that's why there were so many dead bodies in the wilderness. Because so many of the Israelites defied God, their sin led to their death.

You see, the Israelites weren't just ceremonially unclean. This was true, yes. But it was meant to picture the deeper inward reality, that they were spiritually unclean.

That's what God has been impressing upon us ever since Numbers 10. Now at this point, if you've been following along in this series, we've probably witnessed maybe five to six rebellions by Israel against God already.

And maybe we're thinking, enough guys, why don't you just get it? But really, what the Bible is doing in showing us these multiple rebellions by Israel again and again and again, is that he's shining a light on the hardness of the human heart?

[16:34] By nature, we are also rebellious that even external signs, like a pillar of fire, or manna and quail in the desert, or huge grapes from the promised land, or the earth swallowing people up, are they not enough to change our hearts?

I've been reading another award-winning book about the life of an esteemed brain surgeon. He's obviously very good at what he does, but quite often, he talks about looking at the brain scan of one of his patients, and immediately concluding that he just can't operate because the tumour is just too deep down in the brain.

And when we look at the Bible's heart scan, well, we have to conclude that the dirt that clings to our heart is so deep, it can't be operated on.

No mere human being can remove it, and it will kill us. And that reality has never changed.

Alexander Shoshonezin was a Russian novelist and historian who lived in the 20th century. He was an outspoken critic of the Soviet Union, and especially its dehumanising prison system.

[18:00] He saw great evils firsthand, prisoners being tortured, and girls being gang-raped. And yet, despite all that, he came to realise that he was more similar than different to those he opposed.

people who were in the world. He wrote this, he wrote this, if only it were all so simple, if only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us, and destroy them.

In other words, he's saying that if only we could so easily divide the world into good people and bad people, and then we just put the bad people on one side, and then we just get rid of them.

Isn't it so easy? But, he goes on to say, the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart? Well, that's how deep our uncleanness goes.

[ 19 : 17 ] Although, ironically, it might be hidden from us. You see, we're like the victims of rabies.

Those who've been bitten by rabbit dogs can still look completely well on the outside, at least for a while.

They don't look like they've got anything wrong with them. And that can fool them into thinking they don't need treatment. And so they don't seek it until it's too late.

And that's what it's like for us. We're all unclean on the inside. We all need cleansing. But we might think, we're alright.

I don't show any of the symptoms of an unclean heart. I don't steal. I earn an honest living. I come to church regularly. I'm nice to my friends.

But that's because we're asking the wrong diagnostic questions. We're looking for the wrong symptoms. What we actually need to ask is this fundamental question.

[ 20 : 23 ] Do we love God with all our heart and mind and soul, each and every second of the day?

That's the question to ask. And if we don't, we have defiled ourselves. We're terminally ill. We have spiritual rabies.

And we desperately need cleansing. cleansing. And wonderfully, Numbers 19 tells us that such cleansing exists.

Let's come back to the passage. In verses 1 to 10, God begins to give instructions on how to be clean. Now, given that there are already provisions for what happens when you get unclean, back in the book of Leviticus, why is this needed?

Well, just imagine if you have a big family, and all of you are gathered around Grandma's bed as she passes into the night. So now that means everyone is unclean.

[ 21 : 34 ] You're already distressed that Grandma is gone, and now you have to bear the many expenses as well. Preparing sacrifices for each individual is expensive.

Imagine if you have 10 children. You have to buy all those animals. And so God, in his grace, provides a special solution. In verse 2, he says, take a red, spotless cow.

Most commentators suggest it's red because it reminds us of the necessity of the shedding of blood, which is certainly plausible, although we can't be 100% certain. After all, in verse 6, the other ingredients involved sedalwood, and scarlet wool are also reddish.

In verse 3, the cow is to be slaughtered outside the camp, and then verse 4, the blood is to be sprinkled seven times towards the entrance of the tent of meeting.

Now that's significant because that shows what is being conducted here is a sin offering. Leviticus 4 prescribes pretty much the same procedure.

[ 22 : 54 ] But after that, verse 5, the cow is to be burned in its totality. Now that's unique to Numbers 19. Everything, the height, the flesh, the intestines, and get this, even the blood is burned.

That's important. For notice, after the cow is burned, they're told to gather the ashes together. Whatever for?

Well, look at verse 9. A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the hifer and put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp.

They are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing. It is for purification from sin.

Here's the idea. We see in these ashes all of the necessary ingredients for sacrifice. Slaughtered animal, remember?

[ 24 : 04 ] Including the blood. And then there's sadderwood, hyssop, and even scarlet yarn. And so when an Israelite is in need of cleansing, he would go outside the camp, mix water with the ashes of the cow, and then clean himself with this mixture.

It's a bit like instant coffee. Just add water to your tree in one, and there you go, instant sin offering. Now, how does this work?

Let's just look at one example. Consider in verse 14, those who came into close proximity with a dead person. So what does he have to do?

Well, according to verses 17-18, he needs a ceremonially clean person to take some hyssop, which is a small aromatic bush plant of the mint family.

So he takes the hyssop, dip it in the water, and then sprinkle everyone and everything that has come into contact with this dead body.

[25:17] If not, the consequences are very serious. Just look at verse 20. But if those who are unclean do not purify themselves, they must be cut off from the community because they have defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.

The water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on them, and they are unclean. But the point is, you can be clean. In a world where they're literally surrounded and polluted by death, God has provided the cleansing needed.

And so just as we've seen over and over again that human hearts are hard, so we see over and over again that God is gracious.

Back in Numbers 17 verse 12, after Korah's rebellion, the people recognized their uncleanness. They cried to Moses, we will die, we are lost, we are all lost, anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the Lord will die, are we all going to die?

And the Lord answers in Numbers 19, no, because I'm going to provide the cleansing you need.

[26:41] God will be. And this isn't just a word for Israel, it's a word for us. For as we're going to see, Numbers 19 does not stand alone.

Instead, Numbers 19 provides the foundation for the heartbeat of the Christian faith. No mere human being can operate on and clean our hearts, but God can.

And some of the things introduced here in Numbers 19, cleansing, hyssop, sprinkling of water, they are not just hygiene regulations for Israel, they are foundational pieces of the gospel.

Let me show you. Turn with me first of all to Psalm 51, one of the most famous psalms of David. In this psalm, King David cries out to God in repentance, having committed adultery and murder.

But I want you to read this psalm again in light of what we find in Numbers 19. Just look at verse 2, it will also be on the screen. Wash away all my iniquity, David says, and cleanse me from my sin.

[27:58] David knows how unclean he is, even on the inside. But how can he be washed? Well, just jump down to verse 7. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean.

Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. David obviously knows Numbers 19. He needs the hyssop to be dipped into the cleansing waters and to be sprinkled all over him.

But he knows that he needs more than just ceremonial cleansing. Come down to verse 10. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. He longs for a clean heart.

And he's all too aware what will happen if he isn't cleansed.

He won't be able to enter God's presence. He will be cut off. And so David pleads, Don't cast me away, Lord.

[29:08] Make Numbers 19 a reality deep down inside of me. But how is this all going to happen?

Surely cows can't be the ultimate answer? And as we read on and on in the scriptures, we finally hit the main point of the Bible, we encounter the one to whom the entire Old Testament points to, Jesus Christ.

For as we turn to the New Testament, we begin to discover how much Numbers 19 anticipates and underlines the work of Jesus.

So let's begin building our picture of Jesus via Numbers 19. Now there's quite a number of parallels, but I'm just going to concentrate on two or three. And let me just begin by drawing your attention to Numbers 19.

18. Did you notice that the man who is to dip the hyssop and sprinkle the water has to be ceremonially clean himself?

[30:19] Only those who are clean and undefiled can administer the sacrifice on behalf of the unclean and the defiled.

And that's exactly how Jesus is described. Look with me at Hebrews 7 verse 26. It will appear on the screen in a moment. But in 7 verse 22 to 25, let me just set the context, we're told that Jesus brings in a better covenant and is able to save completely.

And now in verse 26, we're told it's because of who he is. Such a high priest truly meets our need.

And now notice how he's described. Notice how he's described. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

he's clean. Hallelujah! He's clean! And that means he's qualified. He's the only heart surgeon in the world who can clean the insides of your heart.

[ 31 : 30 ] Because he's the only one with clean hands. But there's more. In Numbers chapter 19 verse 7, what happens to the priest after he offers the sacrifice and sprinkles the blood?

He becomes unclean. We've seen that already. And verse 22 gives us the principle. Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean.

And anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening. It's as if the ashes and the priest himself is able to cleanse the other person only by absorbing the uncleanness himself.

And that's what Jesus did for you and me. He gave you his clean robes of righteousness and took our unclean robes of unrighteousness all upon himself.

2 Corinthians 5 verse 21 states this clearly. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

[ 32 : 46 ] So this is who we worship. A man who is completely clean. A man who is ready to absorb our uncleanness. A man who offers himself as the perfect sacrifice.

And look at what his death accomplishes. Hebrews 9 verse 13 to 14. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a hypha.

That's Numbers 19. Sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more then will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God.

He operates on the inoperable. He cleanses us inwardly. Well this is the cleansing we need and this is the cleansing we receive far better than even the Old Testament waters of cleansing.

David cried out, wash me on the inside Lord, give me a pure heart, let your Holy Spirit be present with me. And God's answer is given to us in Jesus.

[ 34 : 07 ] And so how should we respond to God's word today in Numbers 19? Well let me suggest three possible ways to respond.

Firstly, come. Come to the waters of cleansing. Perhaps you've never done so before. You've thought that your issues were always external.

It was the fault of the other person. It was the fault of the government. It was the fault of the devil.

But you haven't realised that the greatest issue is internal. The issue of your unclean heart.

Jesus himself said it is what comes out of a person's heart that defiles him. Not something external but something inside of us.

And God is now shining his spotlight on you. He's saying to you, examine your heart heart. Can you see those stains on it?

[ 35 : 11 ] The one that you have tried to hide and to scrub off? There's that stain mark talking bad about your colleagues. There's the other stain mark to absorb in yourself.

And you can't get rid of it. But God says, do you know the cleansing you need is available? You just have to apply it just like you apply shower gel on yourself.

You need to tell Jesus the way King David spoke to God against you, you only have I sinned.

Please wash me and create in me a pure heart.

Well, that's one possible way to respond and I invite any who hasn't responded in this way to do so. Secondly, don't be scared.

Perhaps you already know Jesus as that perfectly clean priest, but you're a bit worried because you know you've gone and gotten yourself muddy again. Thoughts you know you shouldn't have, things you shouldn't have done, secrets that you're harboring that weigh you down, you've gotten stains all over yourself again.

[ 36 : 27 ] Well, the cleansing we need is not simply a once-in-a- lifetime experience. Yes, what Jesus did was once-in-a- lifetime. His death was once-for-all.

But we need to be washed continually. When you get married, you don't stop saying sorry to your loved one. Your wedding day was once-in-a- lifetime, but your relationship continues day-to-day.

And so every day, you need to keep making the choice to keep turning away from your other men and women and keep turning to your spouse.

And so we need to keep saying sorry to God and to turn away from other things and keep turning to Jesus. Well, that's what we did when we took the Lord's Supper earlier, just now.

God but the amazing thing is whatever your sin is, you don't have to be scared. Jesus says, if we confess our sin, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[ 37 : 44 ] That's his wedding vow to you and he never breaks it. Just look at the book of Numbers all throughout and you can see that God is determined to keep his promise.

He will wash you. Thirdly, don't be presumptuous. There is a warning built into Numbers 19 which is repeated twice and that's the fact that if you fail to purify yourself, you'll be cut off.

Your uncleanness remains on you. So in other words, don't ignore Jesus, the one who can purify you. Don't say, okay, thanks Jesus for the Bible lesson this week, bye-bye, see you next Sunday. Don't have false faith. For faith biblically defined, it's not just about knowing facts about Jesus. It's not just saying, oh yeah, I know he can cleanse me.

Faith biblically defined goes further than that. Faith is about confident dependence on Jesus.

Imagine you want to go to Burger King and you have a map that shows you the nearest BK.

[ 38 : 59 ] Now you can believe that you have a map that takes you there. You can even believe that the map you hold is accurate. But how do you really show that you have faith in that map?

It's when you drive according to the markings on that map. you're showing your active dependence on the map rather than just agreeing with it intellectually.

Well, is that how you're living today? Or have you just presumed that you are clean already simply because you've come to church to hear more Bible facts or you don't hang around with so-called immoral people or even that you've just participated in the Lord's Supper?

Does your life show that you're depending on Jesus and his death for you? You see, in the end, the cleansing we need goes deeper than the externals.

These past couple of weeks, there's been some self-examination going on in the wider evangelical world regarding what is now called purity culture. If you don't know what that is, basically, back in the 1990s when I was a teenager, many Christians tried to promote sexual purity amongst young people by getting them to make vows that say that they would wait until marriage to have sex, and then they would wear some sort of symbol, usually a ring, to show their commitment to that vow.

[ 40 : 31 ] Even Disney stars like Selena Gomez and the Jonas Brothers wore them. The intentions and motivations behind this movement were clearly noble. It's a good thing to adhere to a biblical sexual ethic.

But the problem with purity culture in the end was that it concentrated too much on the externals. It thought that you could just be pure and clean simply if you were sincere enough, or just make vows and sign pledge cards and even wear purity rings.

That would be enough, they thought. But it wasn't. Statistically, there wasn't much difference in the conduct of those who took these vows and those who didn't. And then last week, one of the main influences behind the purity movement announced that he was no longer a Christian.

You see, the flaw of purity culture was this. They sincerely thought that all these external things, vows, rings, and so on could purify them.

And in doing so, they forgot Jesus. They forgot that he was the true cleansing agent, not our promises.

[ 41 : 52 ] And as a result, they were let down when they realized that those external things had no power to change their lives. So don't presume.

Don't ever forget Jesus. He's the one who can change us inside out. So don't ever get tired of going to him. Stand under his shower of grace every day.

He's the cleansing we need always and forever. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come before you knowing that even our acts of righteousness are filthy rags.

Everything we touch is stained by sin. Father, thank you that even though the stains go so deep, but your grace goes deeper still.

Thank you that you have rescued us and washed us clean by the blood of Jesus. And so would you help us to actively depend on him each and every day? Help us to exercise true faith in him. Help us to accept his shower of grace.

[ 43 : 09 ] I pray for those who might be feeling guilty this morning. I pray that there will no dead grace that cleanses them. And I pray that we will never presume on our Lord Jesus Christ. In his

name we pray.  
Amen. Amen.