

Christmas and the Longing of Leviticus (Leviticus 12, 15)

To Read:
1. Genesis 3
2. Mark 5:21-34

1 I. Introduction

1 A. This morning we're continuing in the third section of Leviticus

1. This section of Leviticus describes what is clean and what is unclean, and it is closely connected to the previous section and the purpose of the priesthood as seen in the instruction to the priests in Leviticus 10:10-11 - *You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean, and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the LORD has spoken to them by Moses.*"
2. The priests were to distinguish between the clean and the unclean and to teach Israel about the clean and the unclean and now Leviticus is going to teach the priests what these concepts are so that they can teach Israel
3. Last week we started the cleanliness laws, looking at food and making a distinction between Israel and the nations, and we decided that the cleanliness laws were associated with corruption, the result of sin, but were not sinful in and of themselves, instead they were easily visible categories that were supposed to teach a deeper truth
4. As we look at the cleanliness laws, though, a large portion of the laws have to do with reproductive health and the uncleanness that it could bring - and that is what we're going to study this morning
5. We are going to follow a similar pattern as we have the last several months in Leviticus, but because it is Christmas Eve this morning (if a morning can be an Eve...), I'm going to tweak my pattern a little bit
6. Instead of simply studying these chapters, I want to look at these chapters from the angle, "what do these chapters have to do with Christmas?"
7. That may seem like an odd question at first, the reproductive cleanliness laws seem very far removed from Christmas, but as we'll see this morning, I think Christmas is really the ultimate purpose of these laws

1 B. So this morning we are going to look at Leviticus 12 and Leviticus 15 and listen to the longing of Leviticus

1. Leviticus 12 and 15 are the two sections of the cleanliness laws that deal with reproductive health, and though they are separated by a section on skin diseases they are really one unit - in fact Leviticus 12 refers back to Leviticus 15 even though Leviticus 15 comes afterward
2. But before we jump in, I need to acknowledge that these chapters are, at least for some of us, some of the scariest chapters in the Bible - we would prefer not to have to study these things, or especially to discuss such things in church - and I can completely sympathize with that
3. One commentator actually called Leviticus 15, "the most feared chapter in the Bible," and some preaching commentaries I looked at seemed to simply skip over this chapter as though it was unworthy of being preached
4. But these chapters are God's Word to us, the Word that is completely about Christ, the Word that is supposed to build God's people and therefore we ought to be able to study, understand and rejoice in these chapters
5. But because these chapters are sensitive material, I'm going to try to handle the material very carefully - in fact, I'm not even going to read Leviticus 15 publicly this morning, not that it isn't worthy of being read, but to allow parents the ability to determine how and when they would like to discuss these things with their children
6. I'm also going to do a lot less 'verse-by-verse' analysis than I usually do, and we're not going to go into the same depth trying to understand everything that these passages teach - for example, these passages contain a polemic against cultic orgies often practiced in the Near East and also they guard Israel against casual adultery
7. Instead we're going to focus on the broad themes of Scripture that these passages connect to and especially how these chapters prepare us for Christmas

1 C. This morning, I'll start by reading Leviticus 12 - if you have your Bibles turn with me there and we'll read it together

1 D. Proposition: The reproductive laws reminded Israel that their hope was in a promised child, but also convicted them of being completely unable to grasp the promise, leading to a deep longing for God to act to send the promised Son

1. The Longing of Leviticus
2. The Longing Fulfilled
3. Fulfilled and yet Longing

1 II. The Longing of Leviticus

A. As we approach these challenging chapters in Leviticus, I want to think about how these chapters are related to the Biblical storyline - how does Leviticus 12 and 15 fit into the story that started in Genesis and found its culmination in Christ?

1. This really ought to be our goal in every passage of the Bible, but especially in hard Old Testament passages trying to connect the passage to the Genesis-to-Jesus story will guard us against misunderstanding the passage
2. Jesus Himself said that all of the Old Testament was about Him, so to understand these passages rightly, we need to think about how they are about Him
3. But, as we think about that, we also need to remember that these passages needed to communicate their main truth to the first audience - in our case, the Israelites at the mountain - so we need to understand the passage in a way that was true to the first audience but finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ
4. That's what I want to do with these chapters - where did these chapters come from and where are they going?
5. So, as we explore the longing of Leviticus, I want to make three statements about this passage, and the first statement derives from words spoken thousands of years before Leviticus

1 B. First, to understand Leviticus, we must remember that the promise was a child

1. To a modern reader, the Old Testament might seem to spend an inordinate amount of time on topics like sexual ethics and sexual health and sometimes it may be hard to understand how to relate to all of this teaching, especially when much of it isn't followed today - like the commands in our passage today
2. But I think these passages seem foreign to us sometimes because we forget that the story of the Old Testament is a royal birth saga, intensely interested in the fertility and traceability of the royal line
3. So, when we come to passages like Leviticus 12 and 15, the first thing we need to remember is that reproduction was a sacred and solemn event, even a duty, in Israel because the promise had been a child
 - a. This goes all the way back the very first stories of the Bible - man and woman had been created perfectly by God to dwell in His temple, His garden, as His regent-priests in creation
 - b. But the first man and woman rejected God's good order and were exiled from God's temple, but God made a promise that someday they would return
 - c. The nation of Israel was a part of that return - they were again dwelling around God's temple, and a few select priests were even called to enter in to the holy places
 - 1 1 d. But Israel was missing something that was right at the core of the promise - the promise to mankind had been given within the curse on the serpent, Genesis 3:15 - *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*
 - e. For mankind to truly return to God's temple, a promised son needed to be born, a son who could defeat the serpent and undo mankind's rebellion
 - f. Small pictures of this son may have happened several times in Israel - we can think of Isaac - but this promise hadn't been fulfilled yet
 - g. For Israel to truly be God's people, to truly be welcomed back into God's place and dwell with God, the promised son needed to be born
4. So reproduction in Israel was of supreme significance - Israel needed to continue bearing children so that the promised son would be born
 - a. For the faithful Israelite, to bear children was to believe in the promise, to hope in its fulfillment, and, on the other hand, to reject children was to abandon the promise
 - b. We see this portrayed in numerous stories across the Old Testament - in fact, some years ago as we went through Genesis, I showed how this was at the center of the story of Judah and Onan and Tamar
 - c. I'm not going to go through all of that again this morning, but if you're interested, you can go review that passage and the sermon
 - d. But this promise is why reproduction has such a central place in the Old Testament and why so many detailed laws are given about reproduction - the story was looking for a son

1 C. Second, to understand Leviticus, we need to see that a lack of children was a catastrophe

1. If the promise of mankind's return to God's place was absolutely dependent on the birth of a promised son, then a failure to have children, especially an inability to have children was an absolute catastrophe
2. We see this across the pages of the Old Testament as well - stories like Sarah or Racheal or Manoah or Hannah - women unable to bear children, unable to be partake in the promise

3. And we see that reflected in our passages this morning - Leviticus 15 talks at length about the uncleanness of reproductive diseases in both men and women
 - a. And there are perhaps many things that we could discuss in relationship to those laws, but I think that near the heart of these laws is this truth - an inability to bear children in Israel was catastrophic
 - b. These reproductive diseases imperiled the ability to bear children and endangered the promise - therefore they were an uncleanness in Israel, a corruption, a travesty
 - c. If Israel was infected by such diseases then the promise was in peril, if Israel could not bear children then God's promise would fail
4. Even on a less significant level, but still calling us to meditation, each month a woman didn't get pregnant was a travesty - each month a woman demonstrated that she was not with child was an uncleanness in Israel
 - a. Perhaps not permanently, but for the moment, that woman was not participating in the promise - she was not bearing children in hope of a promised son
 - b. Now, we need to be very clear - none of these things were sins, just like all of the uncleanness laws were not sins, but they reminded Israel of something very significant
5. Every time a child was not born was a reminder - a failure to bear children was a reminder that God's promise had not yet been fulfilled
 - a. Every time a child was not born, especially when a child could not be born, the promised son had not come and was no closer to coming
 - b. Every time a child was not born, it was a reminder that God's people couldn't truly approach God until the promised son was born - it was an uncleanness that separated them from God's temple
 - c. God's dwelling in their midst was in peril as long as the promised son delayed, and lost if the promised son did not come, so Leviticus longs for the child to be born
 - d. And that longing for the son is reflected in these reproductive laws - a child needs to be born, the child needs to be born

1 D. But third, to understand Leviticus, we need to see that no parent would ever be worthy of bearing the child

1. Once we see that the promise of a son drives these laws, it is not surprising to see that failures to reproduce were unclean in Israel, but we would expect then that childbirth would be the opposite - but that doesn't seem to be the case
2. As I've meditated on that at length, I think that the thing it teaches us is that every time a child was born, the child was born to sinful parents, parents who were unworthy and unable to bring forth the promise
3. And we see this on several levels in our chapters in Leviticus this morning
4. Leviticus 15 discusses the uncleanness of reproductive diseases at length, but right at the center Leviticus 15 tells us that the reproductive act itself led to uncleanness - the act that would bring forth a child was an unclean thing
 - a. Now again, we need to be careful and say clearly that that doesn't mean sinful, it doesn't even mean that it is not to be celebrated in godly marriage
 - b. But if it's not sinful and it is to be celebrated in marriage, why would it be an unclean thing, especially as it appeared to be an opportunity to pursue the promise
 - c. I think it stands as a reminder that really man could not pursue the promise - they could trust in the promise, and they could act on that trust by bearing children, but they would never be able to bring forth the promise
 - d. At their best, they were still unclean - they needed to pursue the promise, but they couldn't bring it about
5. And, in the same vein, Leviticus 12 tells us how childbirth was also an unclean thing
 - a. Leviticus longs for a child, but every time a child is born there is a reminder of separation from God
 - b. Now, importantly, it is the mother who is unclean, not the child - this will be important as we get into our next section - but the mother who brought a child into the world couldn't effect the promise
 - c. She was an unclean mother, a sinner who was unworthy to fulfill the promise and completely unable
6. Even in bearing children, Leviticus reminds Israel that they were unable and unworthy to fulfill the promise
 - a. They needed to pursue the promise, but in the end, they couldn't, they couldn't grasp the promise themselves

1 E. So, in summary, the laws of Leviticus mourned over Israel's inability to grasp the promise

1. Until the promised son was born, God's people would be unclean, they would be unable to approach God
2. So they needed to bear children, but even in bearing children they couldn't effect the promise
3. There is a deep longing in Leviticus for the childbearing, the promised son, but also a mournful acknowledgment that no man or woman would ever be able to do this
4. If God's promise was going to be fulfilled then God needed to act, if the promised son was ever to come then God needed to bring that about, which leads us to our second point this morning -

1 III. The Longing Fulfilled

A. One of the reasons that I think it is incredibly important to understand these laws against the backdrop of Genesis 3, is that without that understanding of how these laws are woven into the story it is nearly impossible to understand how these laws point us to Christ

1. But once we fit the laws into the Biblical storyline and see the longing for the promised child reflected in these laws and the lingering uncleanness, the lingering separation from God that persisted until the promised son came, we can see much more easily how these laws were ultimately about Jesus
2. So, very briefly I want to show two ways that these law find their culmination in Jesus

1 B. First, Jesus is the promised Child

1. Leviticus longed for the birth of a promised son but also recognizes that such a birth is completely impossible - it would literally be miraculous if an unclean woman could bear the promised child
2. But we know the story, we know that the miraculous did happen, God did act - we know that the Holy Spirit overshadowed a young woman, a virgin connected to the line of David, so that the promised Son would be conceived
3. And then, one last time, we see the laws of Leviticus 12 acted out - an unworthy woman, a sinner gives birth to a son and when the time of her purification was over, she presented her Son at the temple

- 1 1 4. Luke 2:22-24- *And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."*
5. Now this is where it is important to remember that it was the mother, not the child, who was unclean - in one way these laws are a polemic against the Roman Catholic view of Mary
 - a. Assuredly Mary was devote and Mary was infinitely blessed by God, but Mary wasn't worthy - Mary was a sinner, Mary had no hope in herself to bear the promised Son
 - b. But God acted - Mary couldn't, but God did - these laws exalt the fact that God sent His Son, He was born of woman, but God acted, not man
6. And then Mary is the last woman in Scripture that we see purified after childbirth
 - a. Now assuredly the Jews continued the practice, and it is my understanding that some continue the practice even through today, but there's significance in this last recorded event
 - b. These laws found their end in a final birth - the promised Son had come - mankind was unworthy but God had acted to keep His promise!
7. So I don't think it is surprising that the last mention of these laws in Scripture is paired with the announcement by Simeon that this was the promised Son
 - 1 2 a. Luke 2:25-33 - *Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.*
 - b. Simeon's very presence in the Temple was a sign that these laws had reached there end, his presence and even more his words cry out, "it is done, the promise has come!"
 - c. Simeon, in looking at this Son after the purification from childbirth says, "I have seen God's salvation," this is the last time this needs to be done because the Son has come
 - d. And then we never see it happen again - we never see another woman purified from childbirth, that story line of the Bible had come to its appointed end
8. So Jesus is directly the fulfillment of the longing of Leviticus and Christmas is that story
 - a. I doubt many of you would choose Leviticus 12 and 15 to be Christmas meditations, but that's ultimately what they are - they were a reflection of this deep longing that was fulfilled at the birth of Christ

① C. So Kid's, here's your kid's question for this morning

1. How does Leviticus long for Christmas?
- ① 2. Leviticus longs for Christmas, because Jesus is the promised Son.
3. But, I think there is another way that Leviticus longs for Christ in these passages

① ① D. Jesus is the promised Child, but Jesus is also the One who removes our uncleanness

1. These laws in Leviticus longed for the birth of the promised son, but at the same time they continually reminded Israel that they were unworthy and unable to bear the promised son
2. In the end, they were so contaminated that the promised son couldn't come from them - even in pursuing the promise they were unclean - Leviticus both longs and mourns
3. So there is a great joy when the promised son is born, the impossible was accomplished by God - but that is only half of the story, because a mere birth has not done anything to change the basic character of God's people
4. God's people remained unclean, unworthy, unable to approach God - the promised Son not only needed to be born, needed to fulfill His purpose, the promised Son needed to overcome the curse and make God's people clean
- ① 5. So there is another glorious time that these laws are referenced in the New Testament, Mark 5:24-34 - *And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."*
 - ① a. This is an interesting story - a woman afflicted by a disease described in Leviticus approaches Jesus
 - b. Now, by law not only was she unclean, but anything she touches would become unclean - and this explains her stolen touch and her reluctance to identify herself, she was in danger of violating the law
 - c. Technically, by touching Jesus, she should make Him unclean, but she believed that there was something different about Him, something powerful about Him, that somehow He could defeat the curse
 - d. And so she comes and places her hand on Him, and amazingly she is healed, she is made clean - Jesus had overcome the curse, not only was He the promised Son, but He could remove God's people's uncleanness
6. So these passages don't only long for Christmas, they long for the cross as well
 - a. They long for a Son to be born, but also a Son who could carry our sorrows and bear our iniquities and destroy them
 - b. The woman touching Jesus is a powerful statement of the Gospel - according to the law, now He was unclean, but by His power He swallowed up that uncleanness and destroyed it so that in the end it was not He who was unclean but she who was clean
 - c. The futility of God's people met its match in Jesus who would bear their uncleanness and take it to the cross so that they would be made clean again
7. These passages are an intense longing for Christmas but also a reminder that Christmas is meaningless without the cross - the Son needs to be born, but the Son also needs to bear the people's uncleanness
 - ① a. He needed to fulfill permanently the promise of Leviticus 15:31 - *"Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst."*
 - b. He came to be the promised Son that could separate Israel from her uncleanness so that God's people would never defile God's tabernacle again

① IV. Fulfilled and yet Longing

A. As we finish our passage this morning, I want to spend a few minutes thinking about what this passage means for us

1. As with all of Leviticus, we are no longer bound to these laws, but that doesn't mean these laws have no place in our lives, that they don't call us to anything
2. So, as we meditate on these laws and the deeper truth that these laws call us to ponder and as we see the glorious fulfilment of these laws in Christ, I think this passage calls us to three things

① B. First, we need to feel the mourning of Leviticus over the futility of God's people and mourn over our own futility

1. Our passages this morning are full of all sorts of meaning, and we've traced one path from these laws to Christ
2. But these laws did not only teach something about Jesus, they also taught something about God's people - their efforts were futile, they were so stained by sin that they could not hope to fulfill the promise
3. Now, again, we need to be careful and say that these things were not sin - most of them were normal bodily functions - but as we discussed last week, their status as corruption, uncleanness reflected a real truth about God's people - they were unclean, they were unworthy, unable to approach God
4. And as we meditate on that, we need to turn and consider ourselves - we are no more worthy to participate in the promise than the Israelites of old, we are just as stained by sin, we are just as cut off from God, so we ought to feel the hushed mourning of Leviticus and mourn over our own sins as well, the futility of our own actions
- ① ③ 5. In other words, as we read passages like this and meditate on their meaning, we ought to be able to say with Isaiah, Isaiah 64:6 - *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*
6. The language of Isaiah 64:6 is Leviticus language and it says we all are like that
7. All of us are spiritually what this passage describes physically - and that ought to cause us to mourn, we are futile, hopeless, enmired creatures trapped in sin with no hope in ourselves - that should cause us great sadness
- ① 8. So, as we approach Christmas tomorrow, let us do so soberly, with a right understanding of ourselves, a right estimation of our ability - we need to come to Christmas acknowledging that we are worthless, hopeless in ourselves, we need to come to Christmas in desperate need of a Savior
9. But, at the same time, that also ought to cause us to turn away from ourselves and feel the longing of this passage too - we need to look to God to do something because we can't, we are hopelessly trapped; which leads to -

① C. Second, we need to rejoice in the promise fulfilled and put our hope in the sacrificed Son

1. As we saw a moment ago, the longing of our passage is fulfilled at Jesus birth, His life and His death and so, as we look at ourselves and mourn over our futility, even more we need to turn and look at Christ and grasp hold of Him
2. So our passage calls us to mourn over ourselves, but our mourning ought to give way to rejoicing, because what we could not do for ourselves has been done for us by God
3. In fact, the whole gospel is wrapped up in our passage - our passage calls us to repent, to mourn over our sin, and then to see the promised provided and to turn and rejoice, to grasp hold of Christ in faith
- ① 4. So, as we approach Christmas tomorrow, let us do so joyfully - let's rejoice that the promise was accomplished for us, that when we had nothing to give, the promise was given to us and lets renew our faith in the promised Son
5. He is our only hope, and our celebration tomorrow should be about grasping onto Him

1 D. Third, we need to renew the longing of Leviticus as we look forward to His second coming

1. Our passage this morning should have been a continual reminder that their hope was in a promised son - it should have caused Israel to feel a deep and hopeful longing that this promised son would one day be provided
2. We've already considered that that longing has been fulfilled, the child has been born, the promise has been fulfilled - God acted miraculously to bring a perfect son to an imperfect mother
3. But, in some ways, we are in a similar place as the Israelites of Leviticus who were perhaps 2000 years later than the giving of the promise in the garden and yet were still longing for the promised son
4. Assuredly, the promised Son has come, but 2000 years ago He left again and said He would return, and our hope is still that the promised Son would come - but this time no longer born as a babe, but entering as king
5. But our longing for the promised Son to come ought to be similar, we ought to have an eager hope that God will one day keep His promise and send Jesus again
6. In fact, this longing is the last statement of the Bible, our longing ought to be the longing of John who heard the promise and replied, Revelation 22:20 - *He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*
7. So, as we approach Christmas tomorrow, let us do so longingly - let us make sure that there is nothing in this world that is distracting us from that future hope - the celebrations, and trappings, and possessions of this world, even good things like time with family, relationships, memories - these things will try to make us forget that our hope is somewhere else
8. As we celebrate Christmas, let us not do it only as a celebration of a promise fulfilled, but also a declaration of longing that the promise would be fulfilled
9. Let us say this Christmas that our perfect joy can never be complete until the bridegroom returns - we can celebrate His first coming, but we long for His second: Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!