

# *Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church*

## **An Old Testament Picture of the Crucified and Risen Savior (Leviticus 14:1-20)**

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It was Augustine of Hippo, the great theologian of the early church, who first described the remarkable way in which the two testaments of the Bible are interrelated with this memorable statement: "The new is in the old concealed; the old is in the new revealed." What Augustine meant by this statement is that the key to understanding the Bible is to interpret each Testament in light of other. We can only understand the New Testament correctly when we read it against the background of the Old Testament Scriptures; and we can only understand the Old Testament fully when we read it in light of the fulfillment that has come with the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Nowhere is this principle better illustrated than in the passage we are looking at this morning. This passage is found in the book of Leviticus, a book that describes the various priestly rituals that were to be performed by the Jewish priests who lived under the Law of Moses; and like so many rituals described in Leviticus, the ritual described here can only be understood fully in light of the work that Jesus Christ came to perform in the New Testament. When read in that light, this passage turns out to be a remarkable prophecy of the coming of Christ-- a passage that is truly amazing in the detail with which it foreshadows the Person and work of Christ.

The main theme of Leviticus 14 is a happy one, for it concerns the cleansing and restoration to wholeness of someone who had been cut off from all fellowship with God and his fellow men by virtue of uncleanness. The uncleanness here described is of a ceremonial nature; and the cleansing prescribed is also ceremonial, for it concerns cleansing from the ceremonial defilement that resulted from someone contracting an infectious skin disease. There were various diseases that were greatly dreaded in Old Testament times, because of the terrible consequences they brought on those who contracted them; but the most dreaded disease of all was leprosy, for it not only proved fatal in many cases, but it could also lead to a "living death" as the leper was cut off from all contact with his family and with human society. The life of the leper was a lonely, miserable existence that brought the loss of virtually every earthly blessing that the leper formerly enjoyed. There were, however, joyous occasions when a person who had contracted leprosy was cured; and on those occasions, God provided for the complete restoration of the healed person to community life by means of an elaborate

# *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

ritual. All this pointed forward to the spiritual reality in the New Testament of Jesus cleansing His people from the spiritual defilement of sin.

This ritual of restoration took place in two stages. First, there was a ritual involving two birds which took place outside the camp, the area where the Israelites dwelt in tents around the tabernacle in the wilderness. By means of this ritual, the healed leper was permitted to enter once again into the community of God's people, but he could not yet enter into his own tent. To do that, he had to wait a week, and on the eighth day, a second ritual was performed that enabled him to enter his own tent and be fully restored to normal among God's people.

This morning, we will look at the first of these two rituals, the ritual involving two birds.

## I. What is meant by the term "leprosy" in this chapter

Let's begin by considering a question of terminology. When we read in this chapter of "leprosy," we need to understand that this term does not refer necessarily to true leprosy, which today is called Hansen's disease; rather, this is a broad term that includes a variety of skin diseases that were common in the ancient Middle East. True leprosy did exist in ancient Palestine, however, so it would have been included among the diseases classified as leprosy. True leprosy is a very dreadful disease, because it commonly leads to death. In its most deadly form, says one writer, leprosy "begins with little specks on the eyelids and on the palms of the hands, and gradually spreads over the different parts of the body; bleaching the hair white wherever it shows itself, crusting the affected parts with shining scales, and causing swellings and sores. From the skin it slowly eats its way through the tissues, to the bones and joints, and even to the marrow, rotting the whole body piecemeal. The lungs, the organs of speech and hearing, and the eyes, are attacked in turn, till at last consumption or dropsy brings welcome death."

When members of the Jewish community came down with some strange eruption on their skin, the infected individual had to be examined by the priest; and if the priest determined that he had leprosy-- that is, a spreading skin disease that wasn't going away-- it was the priest's duty to declare him unclean, so that he could remove from the community to prevent the spread of defilement.

## II. What was the effect of this disease on the individual who contracted it?

There was no word more feared among the Israelites than the word "unclean," for whoever was pronounced unclean lost all privileges associated with life among the

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

people of God. To be declared unclean meant the end of everything associated with normal life. It was virtually equivalent to a death sentence, therefore, because from that moment on, the unclean individual ceased to have any close contact with his family members and neighbors. He was required to live the exile outside the community of God's people for as long as the disease persisted, cut off from the worshipping community and the means of grace.

In the Bible, disease is frequently used as a metaphor sin, and there are a number of ways in which the disease of leprosy is an especially apt metaphor for sin. The parallels are striking, for in its effects, leprosy, just like sin, is defiling, distancing, degrading, and devastating.

A. defiling-- First of all, under the Law of Moses, the disease of leprosy was defiling. It made a person ceremonially unclean, meaning that he was considered unfit to be in the presence of God or to stand in the worshipping congregation. Throughout the Bible, sin is depicted as having a polluting effect on the life. The infection of sin defiles the inmost heart, contaminating one's desires and breaking forth in the form of unclean thoughts, words and deeds. There is no aspect of our being that is unsullied by sin, for indwelling sin stains every part of the life.

B. distancing-- In addition to being defiling, the disease of leprosy was also distancing. It put a distance between an individual and all others. In Leviticus 13:46, we read this solemn pronouncement regarding the person diagnosed with leprosy: "He is unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp." In like manner, the inner infection of sin alienates us from God and our fellow men. It puts up a wall of separation between the sinful men and their Creator, and will lead to eternal separation from God in hell unless and until God intervenes in

C. degrading-- Third, the disease of leprosy was also degrading in its effects. It stripped the leper of his human dignity. From the moment he was pronounced unclean and sent away from human society, he had to live alone, eat alone, and die alone, like some wild animal. The misery of his condition was to be expressed in the way he dressed. As a sign to others that he was leprous, his hair had to be left unkempt, his clothes had to be torn, and when others approached him, he had to cover the lower part of his face and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He was condemned by his disease to live on a level just slightly above that of the beasts of the field.

In like manner, sin degrades human beings by reducing them to the level of beasts. The apostle Paul describes the unsaved Gentiles of his day as living in a state of bestial ignorance owing to the hardening of their hearts against God. "Having lost all

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality, so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." What a sad degraded condition the unbeliever finds himself in as a result of sin!

D. devastating-- Fourth, the disease was utterly devastating in its effects. It affected every part of a person's life, and unless and until God intervened to heal the infected individual, the disease would work progressive deterioration of one's health and eventual death. So it is with the leprosy of sin; its effects are devastating. Left to ourselves and the natural inclination of our fallen will, sin will work the progressive deterioration of our moral nature, leading to our eternal destruction in hell.

What a sad picture of hopelessness we see in the plight of the leper who lived under the Law of Moses. Yet in this fourteenth chapter of Leviticus, we also see a ray of hope shining into this dark picture, and that hope was based on the fact that sometimes in his mercy God intervened to heal the person who had been diagnosed with leprosy by the priest. Many lepers died of their disease outside the camp, but in some cases, the skin infection cleared up, either because it proved to be a less serious skin disease than true leprosy, or because God intervened miraculously to heal those afflicted with true leprosy by his almighty grace and power.

When someone who had been declared leprous by a priest was healed by God of his affliction, there was a procedure appointed in the Law whereby that person could be restored to community life. It is that procedure I want us to examine now, to see how the ritual of cleansing for leprosy under the Old Covenant typified in many ways the work of Christ under the New Covenant of redeeming sinners from the leprosy of sin. What I want us to see is that the very same gospel that is now preached to us in plain language was preached to God's people of old through the shadowy rituals of the Law. In the ritual described here, there is a clear revelation of the gospel of Christ.

III. What steps had to be taken to restore a cleansed leper to community life?

1) First, the priest had to go to the leper outside the camp to confirm his healing-- We read here that on the day of the leper's cleansing, he was to be brought to the priest. Apparently, word was sent to the priest by some messenger that the leper had been healed by God. Whoever took that message to the priest then brought the leper to meet the priest at some predetermined location where the ritual of cleansing was performed.

Notice that the leper's healing by God did not make him automatically "clean" before God. Even though he was completely healed of his disease, his ceremonial

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

defilement could only be removed by the ministrations of the priest. That was because God had appointed the priest to be a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom we receive cleansing of all our sins.

Notice, too, that the priest had to meet the leper where he was by going to him outside the camp. The leper could not enter the camp to seek out the priest, because he was still in an unclean state, still unfit to enter the community of God's people. That's why the priest had to condescend to identify with the leper in his exiled condition by going to him outside the camp.

I think we see in this a beautiful picture of the condescension of our Lord Jesus Christ in coming to us while we were still in the uncleanness of our sins. While we were in a totally helpless condition, spiritually polluted and unfit to enter the communion of the saints, Christ came to us in our misery and need, to bestow on us freely the blessings of salvation. We did not come to where He was by lifting ourselves up by our bootstraps to the heights of heaven; rather, He came to where we were by descending into the muck and mire of this world. He identified with us in our exile by coming to us "outside the camp" to cleanse us of our sins and to make us whole.

In this we see, as well, a striking contrast between Jesus our Great High Priest and the Jewish priests who typified Him. Those priests could only determine whether or not a person had been healed of leprosy; they could not perform an act of healing. They could make a healed leper ceremonially clean, but they themselves could heal no one. By contrast, Jesus has the power to heal in Himself. He is able, all by Himself, to heal the leprosy of sin; and in the very act of healing, He declares us clean-- clean in the sight of God and fit to belong to the people of God.

2) The priest had to perform a cleansing ritual-- Once the Jewish priest had determined that the leper had been healed by God, he then had to perform a cleansing ritual by which the healed leper was cleansed of his ceremonial defilement and permitted to enter once again into the camp of Israel. It was a most unusual ritual involving the offering of two birds to the Lord. One bird was slain and its blood poured out, the other was set free to fly into heaven stained with the blood of the first bird. In this ritual we see a clear picture of the work that our Lord Jesus Christ would later perform on behalf of sinners. Let us consider how the various details of this ritual point to Christ. .

IV. How does this ritual foreshadow the Person and work of Jesus?

1) First, the first bird had to be killed-- The first detail to notice is the slaying of the first bird. This was the first and fundamental act that had to be performed before the healed leper could be declared clean. Blood had to be shed-- the blood of an innocent

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

substitute. That's because the penalty for uncleanness in Scripture is death. Because God is clean in His own nature, He cannot abide that which is unclean. His righteous nature consumes all that is impure and unholy. Those who are unclean in God's sight cannot hope to come into His presence, therefore, except by the blood of an innocent substitute. That was true of the leper, whose ceremonial uncleanness could only be washed away only through the shed blood of an innocent bird; and it is true of us, as well, whose spiritual uncleanness can only be washed away through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. On the basis of His death alone, we are pronounced clean in the sight of God.

In this ritual slaying of the bird, therefore, we learn a principle of redemption that is later affirmed in the book of Hebrews, where we read that "without the shedding of blood, there is no remission." (Hebrews 9:22).

2) Second, the slain bird had to be clean-- The second detail to notice is that the slain bird had to be clean-- in fact, both birds used in this ritual had to be, according to verse 4, "living and clean birds." Under the Law of Moses, certain birds, such as carrion eating birds like crows, were declared unclean because of their association with death. Other birds, however, like the sparrow and the pigeon, were declared clean-- that is, fit for use in ritual sacrifices.

In the cleanness of these two birds, we see a type of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the New Testament affirms was qualified to serve as our substitute because of the absolute purity of His nature as the sinless Son of God. The writer to the Hebrews describes Him as "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." When He died on the cross, He offered Himself "without spot to God," and for that reason, because of His immaculate nature, His shed blood is able to "cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb. 7:26-27, 9:14).

3) Third, he had to be killed in an earthen vessel-- The third detail to notice is that this first bird, the one that was slain, had to be killed in an earthen vessel. We read in verse 5, "And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water." This earthen vessel was apparently a clay bowl or jar into which the first bird was placed before it was killed and its blood poured out. This detail might strike us as odd, since as Warren Wiersbe points out, "Birds don't belong in clay jars; they belong in the heavens." What is the meaning of this unusual detail? Well, we know that in Scripture the image of an earthen vessel is often used to symbolize the human body. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul said regarding his own ministry as a gospel messenger, "But we have this treasure-- the treasure of the gospel-- in earthen vessels-- a reference to his frail human frame-- "that the excellence of the power may be of God

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

and not of us." Elsewhere, in giving instructions to the Thessalonians regarding sexual purity, Paul says that it is God's will for every person "to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust" (1 Thessalonians. 4:4). So an earthen vessel represents the human body; and if that is so, what you have here in this cleansing ritual is a creature whose natural habitat is the heavens, who is snatched from the heavens for a time to be contained in a vessel of clay, and in that clay vessel, he is put to death so that its blood can wash away the uncleanness of another.

What an amazing prophetic picture this is of our Lord Jesus Christ! From all eternity, Christ's dwelling place was the glory of heaven. But for our salvation, He was willing to descend from there and take upon Himself a frail body of clay, so that in that earthen vessel, He could be put to death on our behalf.

4) Fourth, he had to be killed over running water-- Notice, however, another detail of interest, and that is that the first bird not only had to be killed in an earthen vessel, but over running water. The original text says "living water;" living water is water that never becomes stagnant or polluted because it is constantly flowing. By virtue of its constant movement, it is able to wash away all impurity, so that it remains an ever pure and crystalline stream.

What does this signify, from a New Testament perspective? Well, the fact that flowing water mingled with the blood of the slain bird underscores the cleansing nature of that blood. This blood goes does not stay contained in the earthen bowl, but flows forth freely with cleansing power. That is certainly true of the blood of Jesus, is it not? Having been slain on the cross, His death has opened up a cleansing fountain to which all may draw near and be washed of their sins. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains." The shed blood of Jesus is not some tiny trickle, but a gushing stream that forever flows to wash away all uncleanness. It is a mighty flood, a thundering torrent, like the mighty waters of Niagara, beneath which countless multitudes of sinners may be plunged and come up as clean as a newly born and newly washed infant.

Since flowing water is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit in Scripture, however, there is another possible symbolic significance to this detail. The running water over which the bird was slain reminds us of the fact that when Jesus died on the cross, He offered Himself to God "through the eternal Spirit" (Hebrews 9:14). In other words, it was by the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus' human nature was strengthened to endure the suffering of the cross. So all three persons of the Trinity were involved in the work of atonement. The Father delivered up His Son to die on the cross as a

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

propitiation for our sins. Jesus willingly surrendered His own life for us there. But the Spirit of God was also present there, strengthening our Lord and enabling Him to do what He could not have done in the unaided power of His human flesh. He offered Himself to God through the eternal Spirit, and now the life-giving Spirit flows from Him to all who receive Him as Savior and Lord. "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink," Jesus says. "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, 'out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" We know that by rivers of living water, Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit, whom He gives to all who believe in order to indwell, refresh, empower, and equip them for ministry to others.

5) Fifth, the blood of the bird had to be sprinkled on the healed leper seven times-- The next detail to notice is the fact that the blood of the slain bird had to be sprinkled on the healed leper before he could be declared clean. This is a very important detail, for it points to the need for sinners to personally appropriate the benefits of Christ's shed blood before we can be pronounced clean by God. The leper was not automatically clean the moment the bird was slain; cleansing was effected only when the blood was applied to the leper by means of sprinkling.

There is a false teaching that popular in our day which says that because Christ shed His blood on the cross, all people have already been put into a right relationship to God by that death, whether or not they know it. Those who hold this view believed that the church's message to the world should not be, "believe and be saved," but rather, "believe that you are saved already" since Jesus has died. However, it is not true to say that the benefits of Christ's death are received automatically by everyone, whether or not they believe. On the contrary, the benefits of Christ's atonement become ours only when we look to the Savior to apply to us personally those benefits. We must be sprinkled with the blood of Christ for cleansing to occur, and that only happens when we turn to Christ in faith. Then and only then are our sins washed away by the blood of Jesus.

The blood of the slain bird had to be sprinkled seven times in order for the healed leper to be declared clean. Why seven times? Because seven is the number of completion-- it underscores the perfection of the cleansing the leper received. This reminds us of the fact that when we come to Christ we receive a deep inward cleansing of our spiritual nature that so definitive, so deep, so thorough that its effects can never be reversed. All the guilt of past sins is removed forever, the whole of our debt to God is canceled forever, our hearts are renewed and our conscience made clean by the blood of Christ. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new." Although we still need to confess our sins daily and be cleansed of them, we do not to repeat the total washing that



## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

Christ gave us at our conversion when He imparted to us a new nature. For once our hearts have been renewed by the Spirit and cleansed by faith in Christ, that work of cleansing can never undone.

6) Sixth, the second bird had to be dipped into the blood, then released into the air--

The next interesting detail to notice concerns the bird that was not slain. In order for the leper to be sprinkled with the blood of the slain bird, the bird that was still alive had to be dipped in that blood and then be used as the instrument of sprinkling. Apparently, the priest would dip the bird into the mixture of water and blood in such a way that its wings or feathers became smeared with the blood; then he would give the bird a little shake, so that drops of the blood fell upon the healed leper. At that moment, when the blood was applied, the priest pronounced the leper clean, and upon the declaration, released the living bird, so that it flew away into the heavens, carrying on its wings the blood of cleansing that had been shed.

Most likely, the two birds used in this ritual would have been of the same type, so they would have been more or less identical in their appearance. Consequently, to an observer standing at a distance, it might have appeared as if the ritual involved only one bird which was first killed, then released into the air with blood stains upon it. In other words, the visual effect of this ritual would be to simulate a resurrection, with the same bird apparently dying, then rising up again to life and flying away into the sky. Do we not see in that a clear prophetic picture of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ?

Jesus was not only slain for our sins; having died, He rose up from the dead, since death could not hold Him, and He ascended into heaven carrying in His glorified body the very marks of His atoning work earth. Several hymns celebrate this fact. "Crown Him the Lord of love, behold His hands and side, rich wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified; no angel in the sky can fully bear that sight, but downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright." "Five bleeding wounds He bears, received on Calvary; they pour effectual prayers, they strongly plead for me. 'Forgive him, O forgive they cry, 'forgive him, O forgive they cry, nor let that ransomed sinner die!" This is the first way Christ carries on a priestly ministry for us in heaven -- His very presence there at the right hand of God as the Lamb of God once slain for sinners in itself constitutes a continual prayer of intercession on our behalf, a never-ceasing plea that secures for us the eternal favor and blessing of God. The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way: "Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

## *Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church*

What a glorious picture of our risen Lord we see in the image of that clean, living, blood stained bird flying up into the blue sky of heaven! As that bird arose, so our Lord Jesus arose on the third day and emerged from the tomb never again to suffer the pain of death, but to ascend on high, taking with Him the marks of His triumph in His hands and feet and side,

7) Seventh, other objects had to be dipped into the blood along with the living bird--

One final detail to take note of in this ritual concerns the other objects that had to be dipped into the blood along with the living bird. Those objects were cedar wood, scarlet and hyssop. These three objects may have been put together in some way to form an instrument of sprinkling. Perhaps a cedar stick functioned as a handle, with the scarlet and hyssop bound together functioned as a type of sponge to soak up the blood of the slain bird. These, together with the living bird, were dipped in the blood of cleansing. What was their significance?

Cedar wood in the Bible is known for its enduring, incorruptible character. It does not rot like other types of wood, but endures for many years without undergoing decay. Since leprosy was a disease that involved the rotting or decay of human flesh, the presence of cedar in this cleansing ritual seems to represent the reversal of decay and corruption that is effected when God cleanses us of sin.

Scarlet cloth is noted for its bright red color, so its presence here could possibly represent the restoration of blood infected by leprosy, to a condition of newness and health and vitality, symbolized by the vibrant red color.

Hyssop was a plant associated with cleansing in the Old Testament, for it was used to sprinkle sacrificial blood on individuals for the remission of sins. David in Psalm 51:7 said, "Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow." So hyssop is associated with cleansing from sin. At the same time, because it was an aromatic herb, hyssop was also known for its sweet-smelling aroma; and that could be pointing to the fact that Christ's sacrifice on the cross, typified by the bird that was slain, was a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God. We read in Ephesians 5:2 that "Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma."

What an amazing passage this is-- and how clearly every detail points to the redemptive work our Lord Jesus performed to deliver us from the leprosy of sin. Here in we see pictured, not only Christ's death, but also to His glorious resurrection and ascension to heaven where He now lives and reigns in the glory, from where He will

## *Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church*

return one day when history reaches its climactic moment. Are you ready to meet the returning Lord?

CONCLUSION: I want to conclude this message by simply reiterating a point I made earlier-- namely, that the leper could receive this cleansing only by submitting to the ministrations of the priest, who alone could declare Him to be clean and restore Him to fullness of life. In order to receive these benefits, the leper had to come to the priest. He could not go into the camp and seek the priest there, but he to go to the appointed place of meeting outside the camp where the priest would come to him, there to meet with the priest. If we would benefit from the priestly ministrations of Christ, we must be willing to do the same-- we must be willing to receive Christ as He comes to us through the preaching of the gospel. We need to welcome Him with the open arms of faith and say, "Lord Jesus, please make me clean by the blood you shed on the cross. Heal me of the leprosy of sin that is eating me up inside. Deliver me from death and bring me to a right relationship with God and with the people of God. We cannot sit passively in our uncleanness and hope that Christ will come to us. We must to go to Him, drawn by the Spirit of God, who is able to bring us to the Savior. Amen.