

PURITY AND DISEASE

LEVITICUS 13

This chapter and the next deal with uncleanness in human skin (13v2-46); in clothes (13v47-59) and in the walls of houses (14v33-53). The word that is used to describe all of these conditions is leprosy. Most scholars today agree that "leprosy" is not a good translation here because the Hebrew term includes various kinds of skin diseases. It may include leprosy ("Hansens" disease) but also many other diseases besides leprosy. While health and safety may be considered a by-product of these laws, their primary concern is religious.

SUMMARY

1. Contagious skin diseases 13 v 1-46

The responsibility for dealing with these skin diseases lay with the victim or with his family. The person must be brought to the priest (v2).

(a) What was the priest to do?

The task of the priest was to inspect the sore and to apply two simple tests. Firstly, has the affected area turned the hair white? Secondly, is it deeper than the skin? If the tests are positive then the priest is to pronounce the person unclean (13v5). This is followed by a series of case studies.

V 4-8 In borderline cases infected people were isolated for seven days (v4) and then re-examined. If the rash had not spread, a further seven days' sick leave was granted, after which the person would be pronounced clean and was merely required to launder his or her clothes before resuming normal life (v5,6). If the rash had developed, further appearances before the priest were required and the priest would pronounce the person unclean (v7,8).

V 9-11 Here the chronic nature of the skin disease is obvious from the start (10). With these symptoms there is no need for a period of observation; the person is clearly unclean.

V 12-17 Here the skin condition covers the whole body, from top to toe. If the skin is white, (new skin forming) then he is to be pronounced clean.

V 18-46 This longest section considers a group of cases where the skin disease arises from other conditions, such as boils (18-23), burns (24-28), scabs under facial hair (29-37), psoriasis (38-39) and baldness (40-46). Depending on the seriousness of the condition the victim might be pronounced clean or unclean.

(b) What is the effect of being unclean?

The dreadful implications are spelt out in v45-46. They are instructed to tear their clothes, untidy their hair, cover their mouths, cry, unclean! Unclean! And live alone outside the camp.

2. Contaminated fabrics 13v47-59

The process for treating contaminated fabrics was the same for treating infected human beings. If it was greenish or reddish and appeared to be active, then the article was isolated for seven days (48-50) If at the end of the period the mildew had spread, the article was destroyed by fire (51-52).

The significance of these laws

We have seen that these laws were not primarily about preventing the spread of infection. They are religious laws, relating to fellowship with God. They are visual aids which teach the awesome holiness of God and the holiness that God now requires of His redeemed people.