

Spiritual Leprosy



SPIRITUAL LEPROSY

An understanding of the symptoms of leprosy and the effects of the disease on a person's life will help us to more fully appreciate the subject "Spiritual Leprosy." With this disease, hair falls from the head and the eyebrows; nails loosen, decay, and drop off; joint after joint of the fingers and the toes shrinks up and slowly falls away; the gums are absorbed and teeth disappear; and the nose, the eyes, the tongue, and the palate are gradually consumed. In the Bible, leprosy is a symbol of sin, and just as there are different kinds of leprosy, so there are different kinds of sin. The *spiritual* application of the symptoms is the primary lesson for the Christian.

God's instructions to the nation of Israel concerning leprosy and its diagnosis start in Leviticus chapter 13, as follows:

"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron,

"When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a spot, and it turns into a leprous disease on the skin of his body, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests,

"and the priest shall examine the diseased spot on the skin of his body; and if the hair in the diseased spot has turned white and the disease appears to be

deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous disease; when the priest has examined him he shall pronounce him unclean.

“But if the spot is white in the skin of his body, and appears no deeper than the skin, and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the diseased person for seven days.” (Lev. 13:1-4, Revised Standard Version)

Several unfavorable conditions might be symptomatic of leprosy, and thus, under the Mosaic Law arrangement, the priest had to examine each condition to see if it was of a serious enough nature to put the individual into at least temporary isolation. The first unfavorable characteristic was a swelling on the skin, which spiritually represents pride in an individual. Another unfavorable condition was an eruption or spot on the skin—that is, a running sore or raw flesh—which pictures irritability and oversensitivity.

In examining the individual, the priest noted whether the hair in the diseased spot had turned white and whether the disease was deeper than the skin of the body. In other words, was the disease just a superficial illness, or had it gone deep into the body metabolism? A white hair in the diseased spot was an unfavorable indication, for it suggested a growth, a development. In addition, a spot that was deeper than the skin of the body indicated an internal condition of a serious nature, and the priest pronounced the person “unclean.” However, if the spot was

white and appeared no deeper than the skin and if the hair in the spot had not turned white, the priest quarantined the person for seven days, but he made no “unclean” pronouncement at that time.

In the first instance, the presence of both symptoms—the hair turning white and the disease being deep—shows spiritually that the person is a chronic sinner and that the practice is a habitual sin in his life. The two symptoms led the priest to pronounce the individual unclean. However, if the spot was white in the skin but was superficial and the hair had not turned white, then either the condition was something other than leprosy, or it was the early beginnings of leprosy—and hence, spiritually, the early beginnings of sin as prefigured in leprosy.

“... the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if in his eyes the disease is checked and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up seven days more;

“and the priest shall examine him again on the seventh day, and if the diseased spot is dim and the disease has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; it is only an eruption; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean.

“But if the eruption spreads in the skin, after he has shown himself to the priest for his cleansing, he shall appear again before the priest;

**“and the priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is leprosy.”
(Lev. 13:5-8, RSV)**

After a person had been “shut up” for seven days in temporary isolation, the priest examined him on the seventh day. (This was the second examination.) If the disease was checked and had not spread in the skin, the individual was shut up for another seven days; that is, the person was shut up *for seven more days, even though there had been an arresting of the disease*. The fact that the disease had not spread was a partially favorable indication, but it was not sufficient for a pronouncement of “clean.” Unless the disease showed evidence of being *partially cured* and was thus *progressing in a favorable direction* by the end of the second seven-day quarantine period, the individual could not be pronounced clean or released from his isolation. Stated another way, the stalemate condition required the priest to quarantine the person for a second period of seven days and then examine him, once again, on the seventh day. (This was the third examination.)

Following the second seven-day quarantine, if the diseased spot was dim and the disease had not spread in the skin, the priest pronounced the person clean. In other words, if the diseased spot, which previously was bright and sore, now had a scurf of healing, if there was some healing in the skin and a

returning to normalcy, if the disease was arrested and a partial indication of cure was evident in the individual—the spot did not have to be perfectly clean, but it had to show a favorable trend in the right direction—then the priest pronounced the individual clean. The spot was considered only an eruption, so the individual washed his clothes and was considered clean. If, however, following the second quarantine, the priest examined the eruption and found it had spread, he pronounced the individual unclean, for the disease was leprosy.

The antitypical lesson is that in connection with sin, God gives His people opportunity to repent, make progress, and mend their ways. He is not willing that they should be *permanently* condemned to the condition of isolation from Him, so He provides periods of *temporary* isolation or cutting off, as it were, for the person to become cognizant of his condition and thus repent, ask for forgiveness, and reform his conduct. *If such steps are taken*, progress is made toward healing and cleansing, and forgiveness is extended to the individual with a pronouncement of “clean” in regard to that particular affliction.

“When a man is afflicted with leprosy, he shall be brought to the priest;

“and the priest shall make an examination, and if there is a white swelling in the skin, which has

**turned the hair white, and there is quick raw flesh
in the swelling,**

**“it is a chronic leprosy in the skin of his body, and
the priest shall pronounce him unclean; he shall
not shut him up, for he is unclean.”
(Lev. 13:9-11, RSV)**

In this case, there were *three unfavorable symptoms*: a white swelling in the skin, white hair, and “quick raw flesh.” The quick raw flesh indicated a sharp, corrosive leprosy breaking through the skin in a particular part of the body. This malady was thus distinguished from another type of leprosy that freely broke out in a white scurf all over the body but without the raw flesh.

It is important to keep in mind that in discussing leprosy, we are considering the symptoms of this disease as recorded in the Old Testament. In certain places in the Bible, leaven is a picture of sin; for example, “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9; 1 Cor. 5:6). However, leaven is used to show only the *contagious influence* of sin, whereas leprosy is a more complicated picture that illustrates *several symptoms* of the disease of sin. In other words, the type in the Book of Leviticus does not mean that the individual who was afflicted with leprosy was indeed a sinner above all others. Rather, the Lord used the *symptoms* of leprosy to illustrate unfavorable conditions that can develop in a Christian who gets *spiritual* leprosy and has great difficulty being cured.

“And if the leprosy breaks out in the skin, so that the leprosy covers all the skin of the diseased person from head to foot, so far as the priest can see,

“then the priest shall make an examination, and if the leprosy has covered all his body, he shall pronounce him clean of the disease; it has all turned white, and he is clean.

“But when raw flesh appears on him, he shall be unclean.

“And the priest shall examine the raw flesh, and pronounce him unclean; raw flesh is unclean, for it is leprosy.

“But if the raw flesh turns again and is changed to white, then he shall come to the priest,

**“and the priest shall examine him, and if the disease has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce the diseased person clean; he is clean.”
(Lev. 13:12-17, RSV)**

In this seemingly strange case, a person was considered *clean* when he was *white with leprosy all over, from head to foot*. But notice that there was only *one* symptom of the disease, and many pronouncements of uncleanness were associated with at least *two* unfavorable symptoms. Here the person was covered from head to foot with white leprosy, but no swelling or raw flesh accompanied the disease in any part of the organism. The antitypical

lesson is that the individual's consciousness of his sin produces an unreserved confession of his guilt and that he patiently accepts reproof. As a result, he is white all over, as it were. In contrast, the condition of a *running* sore denotes the disposition of the proud sinner to resist conviction, and the *rawness* of the sore indicates his sensitivity to reproof or correction and his resentment of even the mildest criticism.

The following observations or distinctions are important in regard to antitypical lessons. A scurf covered *only the surface* of the individual's body; that is, it did not manifest a condition of the disease below the skin. Thus those who are *not in heart sympathy with sin in spite of the deeds of their flesh* can be considered clean. But suppurating sores indicate a corruption, a bursting forth. Hence quick raw flesh represents sensitivity not to sin but *to correction*.

“And when there is in the skin of one's body a boil that has healed,

“and in the place of the boil there comes a white swelling or a reddish-white spot, then it shall be shown to the priest;

“and the priest shall make an examination, and if it appears deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is the disease of leprosy, it has broken out in the boil.

“But if the priest examines it, and the hair on it is not white and it is not deeper than the skin, but is dim, then the priest shall shut him up seven days;

“and if it spreads in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is diseased.

“But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread, it is the scar of the boil; and the priest shall pronounce him clean.

“Or, when the body has a burn on its skin and the raw flesh of the burn becomes a spot, reddish-white or white,

“the priest shall examine it, and if the hair in the spot has turned white and it appears deeper than the skin, then it is leprosy; it has broken out in the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

“But if the priest examines it, and the hair in the spot is not white and it is no deeper than the skin, but is dim, the priest shall shut him up seven days,

“and the priest shall examine him the seventh day; if it is spreading in the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is a leprous disease.

“But if the spot remains in one place and does not spread in the skin, but is dim, it is a swelling from the burn, and the priest shall pronounce him clean; for it is the scar of the burn.” (Lev. 13:18-28, RSV)

The repetition tends to be fatiguing, especially when we are diligently trying to understand the intended message. Although, on the one hand, the repetition is a trial of our patience, on the other hand, it helps us to recognize the major factors that provide clues for antitypically interpreting the symptoms of leprosy.

In the case of one who was burned by fire, the burn left a scar. If leprosy appeared in the spot, it had to be distinguished from the scar by the rules given. What is the antitypical lesson? Careful investigation indicates whether sin or grace rules in the heart of the Christian and in his spirit and conduct as the effect or result of external events.

In these two instances, a swelling or raw flesh arose from a previous boil or burn. Spiritually speaking, these localized infections indicate a particular experience in the life of a Christian wherein he has to be very careful that the root of bitterness does not arise within him. He must not take an unfavorable experience in an unfavorable manner but should be properly exercised in connection with the trial and not evil speak or resent the experience suited to him.

And there is a further observation. In the type, the priests were told how to distinguish between an ordinary malady and leprosy that might arise in a healed ulcer or boil. If the priest did not find symptoms of leprosy in a boil that became hot and

reinflamed, the boil was just a burning and troublesome infection that would eventually work its way out of the individual's system. In the antitype, the development of leprosy in a healed ulcer or boil represents the return of a professed believer to his old habits and sinful practices. In such cases, the last state of the individual is worse than the first (Matt. 6:23; 12:43-45).

“When a man or woman has a disease on the head or the beard,

“the priest shall examine the disease; and if it appears deeper than the skin, and the hair in it is yellow and thin, then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is an itch, a leprosy of the head or the beard.

“And if the priest examines the itching disease, and it appears no deeper than the skin and there is no black hair in it, then the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for seven days,

“and on the seventh day the priest shall examine the disease; and if the itch has not spread, and there is in it no yellow hair, and the itch appears to be no deeper than the skin,

“then he shall shave himself, but the itch he shall not shave; and the priest shall shut up the person with the itching disease for seven days more;

“and on the seventh day the priest shall examine the itch, and if the itch has not spread in the skin

and it appears to be no deeper than the skin, then the priest shall pronounce him clean; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean.

“But if the itch spreads in the skin after his cleansing,

“then the priest shall examine him, and if the itch has spread in the skin, the priest need not seek for the yellow hair; he is unclean.

**“But if in his eyes the itch is checked, and black hair has grown in it, the itch is healed, he is clean; and the priest shall pronounce him clean.”
(Lev. 13:29-37, RSV)**

Here the *yellow* hair was an unfavorable condition similar to the white hair earlier. However, if the malady was subsequently corrected or went in a favorable direction, the previously yellow hair turned into black hair; that is, it returned to a condition of *normalcy*. Thus yellow hair was a symptom of leprosy, and black hair was an indication to the contrary. In antitype, the yellow hair indicates one who is hoary or *old* in his sin; it shows a soiled condition, contamination, and sin. The black hair pictures humility, which is a healthy condition in God's people.

In these verses, the priest was taught how to diagnose leprosy of the hair, the head, or the beard and how to differentiate it from other disorders that might afflict these parts with a superficial resemblance. Shaving the head around the skull assisted in

detecting any spread of the disease. If the disease spread, the individual was pronounced unclean, even though yellow hair was not in evidence. In antitype, the mere spread of the disorder is sufficient evidence of the person's guilt.

As with other symptoms of leprosy, the itch has lessons for the Christian. An unfavorable sign, the itch represents that class of Christians who are "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"; they are dissatisfied and unstable (2 Tim. 3:7). From another standpoint, the itch pictures those who like to have their own ears tickled or scratched; that is, they listen only to the things that please them and their flesh, and they do not heed the wholesome counsel of the Word or the medicine they so sorely need for their disorder.

Because the subject of spiritual leprosy is too large to treat all aspects, we will read three groupings of Scripture and just comment on the last:

"When a man or a woman has spots on the skin of the body, white spots,

"the priest shall make an examination, and if the spots on the skin of the body are of a dull white, it is tetter that has broken out in the skin; he is clean." (Lev. 13:38,39, RSV)

"If a man's hair has fallen from his head, he is bald but he is clean.

“And if a man’s hair has fallen from his forehead and temples, he has baldness of the forehead but he is clean.

“But if there is on the bald head or the bald forehead a reddish-white diseased spot, it is leprosy breaking out on his bald head or his bald forehead.

“Then the priest shall examine him, and if the diseased swelling is reddish-white on his bald head or on his bald forehead, like the appearance of leprosy in the skin of the body,

“he is a leprous man, he is unclean; the priest must pronounce him unclean; his disease is on his head.” (Lev. 13:40-44, RSV)

“The leper who has the disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head hang loose, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry, ‘Unclean, unclean.’

“He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean; he shall dwell alone in a habitation outside the camp.” (Lev. 13:45,46, RSV)

What a pitiful condition was the lot of the leper, who was required to live as an outcast without the camp of Israel! His clothes had to be “torn” or *tattered*, and having to let his hair hang loose meant that his individuality and name were known and that he could not hide behind the disease. Moreover, he had to cover his upper lip and repeatedly confess his condition by crying “Unclean, unclean” as a warning to any who were approaching

that leprosy was contagious. Even though some today do not consider leprosy to be a contagious disease, the reality is to the contrary. Leprosy is a very slow contagion, and in fact, the slow development of symptoms over many years is a problem in diagnosis. Leprosy is also a relatively painless disease. In the beginning, sensitivity is one of the chief symptoms, but as time goes on, numbness develops in the body of the afflicted individual until he does not feel pain anymore. And so it is with sin. At first, the conscience may be tender, but later on, if the sin is not checked, the person becomes hardened and is thus in a condition where he cannot take reproof in a proper or constructive manner. There are two ways of receiving reproof: (1) with resentment or (2) with acceptance and being rightly exercised. From the standpoint of the Mosaic Law, it is apparent that leprosy was meant to represent sin and its loathsomeness, contagion, and consuming character.

If we follow the account through Leviticus chapter 14, we will see that a leprous spot could also appear on an individual's garments or on the wall of his home. Part of the account follows:

**“When there is a leprous disease in a garment,
whether a woolen or a linen garment,**

**“in warp or woof of linen or wool, or in a skin or in
anything made of skin,**

“if the disease shows greenish or reddish in the garment, whether in warp or woof or in skin or in anything made of skin, it is a leprous disease and shall be shown to the priest.

“And the priest shall examine the disease, and shut up that which has the disease for seven days;

“then he shall examine the disease on the seventh day. If the disease has spread in the garment, in warp or woof, or in the skin, whatever be the use of the skin, the disease is a malignant leprosy; it is unclean.

“And he shall burn the garment, whether diseased in warp or woof, woolen or linen, or anything of skin, for it is a malignant leprosy; it shall be burned in the fire.” (Lev. 13:47-52, RSV)

Garments sometimes symbolize Christian character. The apostles spoke of the garments of salvation and of the possibility that the imputed robe of Christ's righteousness might become soiled and need cleansing (1 Thess. 5:8; Jude 23; Rev. 7:14). Also, the Scriptures picture the Christian as dwelling in a house or a tabernacle in the present life, and the spiritual lessons are the same as having leprosy in the body (2 Cor. 5:1,4; 2 Pet. 1:13,14).

It is not surprising that many do not wish to examine the subject of leprosy in the Book of Leviticus. Reading the verses is distasteful and fearsome, and this very fact leads some Christians to shun lessons that are needful for their salvation. Through the

repulsiveness of leprosy and the unenviable lot of those afflicted with the disease, the Lord is showing the *enormity of sin* and the need to repent and go to the Great Physician to ask for healing. Back in the type in Old Testament times, leprosy could be cured only by a miracle. The disease had such strong roots in the body metabolism that it was considered miraculous when anyone was healed. No wonder those who saw Jesus heal the lepers marveled at the power he possessed!

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Frank Shallieu