

22.

MESSAGE 18

UNCLEANNES FROM TSARAATH IN HOUSES

Leviticus 14:33-53

Introduction

A fourth type of uncleanness was from tsaraath in stone and plaster houses. It is specifically said that these regulations would apply when the Israelites came into their Land. The reason was that in the wilderness they lived in tents, not houses. Tsaraath had similar effects on stone and plaster that it had on cloth and leather. Whether or not the cause of the infestation was the same in stone as in cloth or leather, the appearance was so similar that the Israelites considered them to be the same malady. They called both conditions by the same name. The tsaraath that people experienced in their bodies was probably a different disease, but its appearance in each case was so similar that the Israelites called all three conditions by the same name. The three maladies were all made by Jehovah to be symbols of sin, in order to teach the Israelites the importance of keeping their lives separate from sinful thoughts, words, and actions.

Tsaraath of houses, like tsaraath of people and of cloth or leather, was never called “foul,” “loathsome,” or “repugnant.” Neither does the text imply that the condition was contagious. The condition did not cause uncleanness because of some characteristic that made it terrible or repulsive in itself. Jehovah chose the condition for the sake of symbolism. Like the other forms of uncleanness, tsaraath in a house was a symbol of sin in the lives of God’s people. Though the Israelites had accepted the covenant and had become God’s people, they needed to understand that temptation to sin would continue to trouble them. They needed to be warned to avoid those temptations. When they did sin, they needed to seek not only forgiveness but also cleansing from the effects those sins left on their lives. Sin in a person’s life affects how he uses everything he owns. Abuse spreads from his heart to his life and from his life to his house and to all his other possessions, so his use of them needs to change as well. Cleansing from tsaraath in houses symbolized removing the detrimental effects that sin had, not only from the person himself but also from all he possessed..

This MESSAGE may be outlined as follows:

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**Interpretation**

## CHAPTER 14

Introductory note (14:33)

Verse 33. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,**

Another MESSAGE from Jehovah is introduced by this verse. This MESSAGE was spoken to Moses and Aaron. It likely was delivered on the sixth of the seven days of filling, as Aaron and his sons prayed and studied in The Tabernacle as a part of their hallowing ceremonies. Since Aaron was in the courtyard of The Tabernacle when God spoke, it was natural from Him to address the MESSAGE to both Moses and Aaron (see comments on Lev. 8:22 in MESSAGE 10, in the Introduction to MESSAGE 14 and on Lev. 11:1 in MESSAGE 14).

- a. Recognition by a priest of *tsaraath* in a house (14:34-39)

Verse 34. **When you come into the land of Canaan that I will am giving you for a possession and I put a striking of *tsaraath* in a house [in] the land of your possession,**

*Tsaraath* could also infect houses made of stone and plaster. It is stated that the practices of this MESSAGE would apply when the Israelites had come into the land of Canaan, because then they would live in stone and plaster houses. The land was called “the land of Canaan,” because at that time the descendants of Canaan lived there (Gen. 10:6,15-19; 12:6; 13:7

God had promised Abraham that he would give that land to his descendants (Gen. 13:14-17; 17:8), and God had specified to the Israelites as they traveled through the wilderness for forty years that the land of the Canaanites was their destination (Ex. 3:8,17; 6:4; 13:5,11; 15:15; 23:23,28; 33:2; 34:11). However, this verse is the first time in Leviticus that the land of Canaan is actually named as the land God was going to give them.

Verses 35-36. **35 Then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, It appears to me that a striking is in the house.**

**36 Then the priest shall command that they empty the house before the priest goes to examine the striking, so that everything that [is] in the house will not be declared [unclean]. Afterward the priest must go in to look at the house.**

If a person suspected that *tsaraath* was in the walls of his house, he was obligated to report it to a priest. The priest would first command that everything be taken out of the house, so that if the house was stricken with *tsaraath* everything in it would not have to be declared unclean. Emptying the house was not to prevent the destruction of the furniture, as a number of interpreters have said, because objects made unclean by contact with an uncleanness were not destroyed but cleansed (Lev. 11:25,27-28,31,32,40; 14:46-47; 15:5-11,18,22-24,27). The only exception was pottery vessels into which the uncleanness had penetrated and could not be removed by washing the surface (see comments on Lev. 11:33,35; in MESSAGE 14 and on Lev. 15:12 in MESSAGE 19). Since *tsaraath* represented sin, the removal of the furniture probably was to teach the importance of avoiding close association with sinful activities. Staying present when sinful activities are taking place leaves damaging marks on our lives, our attitudes, and our speech. Those marks are a lot harder to remove than they are to gain.

When the furniture had been removed, the priest was to go to the house to examine it.

Verse 37. **And he shall examine the striking, and if the striking in the walls of the house [is] a greenish or reddish depression and their appearance [is] deeper than the [surface of] the wall,**

The priest was to look for identifying marks of *tsaraath* in the stricken spot or spots on the wall of the house. The marks were three in number. First, the spot was to be a depressed spot in the

wall. The word translated “depression” is a compound Hebrew word. One part means “something hollowed out,” and it was applied to dishes and platters. The other part came from a root meaning “to settle,” and it was applied to the settling of impurities in water so that the water would become clear. This compound word seems to mean that the spot in the wall would have sunken lower than the surrounding wall. Second, the spot would have a reddish or greenish tint. Third, the coloration would appear to extend below the surface and into the wall. These identifying marks do not sound like a description of mold or mildew, as interpreters have often thought it to be. More likely, it was a type of fungus that affected plaster and stone (see comments on Lev. 13:59 in MESSAGE 16).

Verses 38-39. **38 Then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and he shall shut up the house [for] seven days.**

**39 And the priest shall come again on the seventh day, and if the striking has spread in the walls of the house,**

If the three identifying characteristics were found in the affected spot in the house, another test was to be applied. The house was to be “shut up” for seven days and examined again after that length of time. Here “shut up” could not have meant to put the house outside the camp or city. It meant the house was to be isolated and not used. This observation confirms the conclusion that “shutting up” a person or a piece of cloth or leather that was suspected of having *tsaraath* did not mean putting him or it out of the camp but restricting him or it for seven days until a further examination could be conducted (see comments on Lev. 13:4,24-28,29-37;50-521,53-54 in MESSAGE 17). After seven days, a fourth characteristic was to be looked for, that is, spreading of the condition. If the condition had spread, the house was infested with *tsaraath*. The text does not specifically say that *tsaraath* was in the house, but it certainly implies it. However, before the house was condemned, an effort was to be made to heal the infestation, because declaring a person’s house to be unclean was a drastic action.

b. Efforts to heal a house of *tsaraath* (14:40-48)

Verses 40-44. **40 Then the priest shall command, and they shall take out the stones in which the striking [is], and they shall throw them outside the city at an unclean place.**

**41 And he shall cause the house to be scraped from around the spot in the house, and they shall pour the plaster that they scraped off outside the city at an unclean place.**

**42 Then they shall take other stones and put them in the place of those stones, and he must take different plaster, and he shall plaster the house.**

**43 And if the striking breaks out in the house again after he has taken out the stones and scraped the house and plastered [it],**

**44 Then the priest shall go and look, and if the striking has spread in the house, it [is] a striking of *tsaraath* in the house. It [is] unclean.**

In the case of a house infested with *tsaraath*, the priest was to allow time for efforts to be made to heal the infestation in the house. He was to command that the affected stones and plaster be removed and replaced with fresh stones and plaster. The stones that had been removed were to be cast in an unclean place outside the city. The plaster around the affected spot was to be scraped off and poured out in an unclean place outside the city. Note that “city” is referred to here, instead of “camp,” implying the settled conditions the Israelites would have after they possessed their own Land. The unclean place was undoubtedly the garbage dump, where carcasses of dead animals and other ceremonially unclean objects were disposed of, along with the refuse of the city.

This effort was more than another test to see if the house was truly infested with *tsaraath*. It was an effort to heal the house, because verse 48 says that if the required actions were successful, the house was healed. Allowing time for healing the house was merciful because declaring a person’s house unclean meant the house had to be destroyed. The destruction of a person’s house was a drastic action. However, if the condition returned after all the suspicious material had been removed and replaced, it was infested with “piercing” or

“persistent” *tsaraath* (see comments on Lev. 13:51 in MESSAGE 16). The house could not be healed. It had to be destroyed.

Verse 45. **And he shall break down the house, its stones and its wood and all the plaster of the house, and he shall carry [them] out of the city to an unclean place.**

The owner of the house was to dismantle the house and cast all its materials into an unclean place outside the city. The destruction of the house taught that, when sin becomes a persistent habit, it destroys the person’s life.

Verses 46-47. **46 And he who entered the house [in] all the days it is shut up must be unclean until the evening.**

**47 And he who lay down in the house must wash his clothes, and he who ate in the house shall wash his clothes.**

If any person entered the house, slept in it, or ate in it during the period of waiting to see if the striking was truly *tsaraath*, he was to be unclean. He needed to carry out cleansing ceremonies. The cleansing activities needed to be carried out, even if days had passed since the person entered the house or slept or ate in it during the waiting period. The person was not clean until he or she carried out the cleansing ceremonies. Verse 46 states that anyone who entered the house would be unclean until the evening. Verse 47 states that anyone sleeping or eating in the house was to wash his clothes. Evidently both the waiting and the washing were to occur in both cases, because both washing and the passing of time were standard for cleansing ceremonies, even though the washing requirements were not identical in all cases (see comments on Lev. 11:25,26-28,32,40 in MESSAGE 14, on Lev. 14:46-47 in MESSAGE 18, and on Lev. 15:5-11-12,13,16,18,22-23,25-27 in MESSAGE 19). The cleansing ceremony for a person who had come into contact with an unclean object was not as elaborate as the cleansing ceremony for the unclean object itself. This arrangement signified that the effect of sin on a person who associated with sinners was not as severe as the effects on the sinner himself. Nonetheless, simply associating with sinners did have its damaging effect. Those effects needed to

be cleansed through personal effort and the passing of time.

Verse 48. **And if the priest comes and examines [the house] and the striking in the house has not spread, after the house was plastered, then the priest shall declare the house clean, for the striking has been healed.**

When the priest returned to examine the house after the affected stones had been removed and the affected plaster had been replaced, if the condition had not returned, the priest was to declare the house clean. The effort to heal the house had been successful.

c. Cleansing a house that was healed of *tsaraath* (14:49-53)

Verses 49-53. **49 And he shall take for the cleansing of the house two small birds, cedar wood, and scarlet cochineal [yarn], and hyssop.**

**50 And he shall kill one of the birds in a clay vessel over running water,**

**51 And he shall take the cedar wood and the hyssop and the scarlet cochineal [yarn], along with the living bird; and he shall dip them in the blood of the bird that was killed and in the running water; and he shall splatter the house seven times.**

**52 And he shall cleanse the house with the blood of the bird and with the running water and with the living bird, and with the cedar wood, and hyssop, and scarlet cochineal [yarn].**

**53 And he shall let the living bird go out of the city into the open field, and he shall cover over the house, and it shall be clean.**

Just as in the case of a person who had been healed of *tsaraath*, a house that had been healed had to be cleansed. It is abundantly clear that the healing and cleansing of the house were two entirely separate events, showing that those who interpret cleansing in terms of health and healing have missed the point. Cleansing the house showed that, even after a believer has ceased to sin, the effects of his sins remain on his life. Those effects need to be removed. The cleansing ceremonies symbolized how that cleansing could take place. The cleansing ceremonies for a house were identical

to the ceremonies for the cleansing of a person who had been healed of *tsaraath*, except that the cleansing ceremonies for a house did not include offerings at The Tabernacle (see comments on Lev.

14:2-9 in MESSAGE 17). A house could not offer fire-offerings and could not understand the spiritual experiences they represented.

### **Application**

Sin is an extremely pervasive force. It is found in every phase of life. The people of God meet it everywhere we turn. When our lives are touched by it, it leaves damaging effects. Damage occurs whether the Christian sins himself or only closely associates with sinners. The Christian must be alert to avoid every close association with sin as far as possible. When he fails to avoid it, he or she must seek in every way possible to remove its damaging effects from his or her life

Avoiding close association with sinners does not mean staying away from them completely. In fact, Christians are obligated to seek out lost people, befriend them, and seek to draw them to Jesus. However, that friendliness needs to stop when it comes to sharing companionship with lost friends when they are doing sinful activities. When that times comes, the Christian needs to take his leave and return when the sinful activities are not taking place. If we continue to remain where sinful activities are taking place, we will seem to be condoning them; and we will not be able to draw our lost friends away from them. Even worse, we may become desensitized to those sinful activities and be tempted to join in them ourselves. Where and how to draw the line may be difficult, but when the time comes that we must tolerate sinful activities in order to continue a friendship, it is time to draw away. Only by doing so can we avoid the damage that comes from close association with sin and sinners. Friendship with people who participate in sinful activities is good as long as it helps us influence them away from their sins. It is harmful when it begins to influence us to accept or even participate in those activities ourselves.

When we are involved in occasions when sinful activities are taking place, we will take away with us dangerous attitudes and even noticeable actions or words that are unbecoming to a Christian. The only remedy is to confess our wrong and ask forgiveness. God will gladly forgive, but then we are faced with the need to cleanse away the effects that have been left on our lives. It will take time, effort, permanent commitment, and surrender to God to erase from our minds the thoughts that are left behind and even the words we have learned to speak. When we invest ourselves earnestly in that effort, the marks of the world will fade from our lives and the likeness of God will replace them.