

TWENTY-SIXTH MESSAGE:
BLEMISHES DISQUALIFYING A PRIEST FROM SERVING
BEFORE THE VEIL OR AT THE ALTAR
Leviticus 21:16-24

Introduction

This MESSAGE is the first of four MESSAGES dealing with factors disqualifying the priests, their families, and animals from being used in roles assigned to them in The Tabernacle offerings. This MESSAGE deals with factors disqualifying the priests themselves. Two of the roles assigned to the priests were to officiate over fire-offerings at the altar and to present holy oil and face bread in The Holy Place, the outer room of the tent portion of The Tabernacle. Certain physical blemishes disqualified a priest from performing those services. Those physical blemishes are explained in this MESSAGE.

It should be noted that this MESSAGE nowhere states that a priest with a blemish was forbidden to serve as a teacher of the law, which was also a responsibility of the priests (Lev. 10:11). Also, a special point is made of the fact that he could eat of the holy portions of the offerings, which were eaten by the priests and their families in their homes. He could also eat of the most holy portions, which were eaten only by the priests in the court of The Tabernacle (v. 22). Thus, a physical blemish did not keep a priest from being a part of the people of God or a part of the priestly family. It simply disqualified him from officiating at the altar or serving inside the Tent of Meeting.

The purpose of these requirements was ceremonial and symbolic. The Tabernacle offerings were symbols of spiritual experiences with God. It was important for every aspect of their observance to be whole, perfect, and pure in order to properly represent the wonder of the spiritual experiences they represented. A priest with a physical blemish could not be an adequate symbol of those holy experiences. He was disqualified, not because he was spiritually unworthy or because he was out of favor with God, but for the sake of the symbolism. He was as welcome as anyone to approach the altar to offer an offering for himself. He was disqualified to officiate over another person's offering there, because when he officiated at the altar he symbolized God's receiving the worshiper's offering. He was also disqualified from performing symbolic services inside the Tent of Meeting. The reason he was disqualified was that in those ceremonies, he symbolized God as He received a worshiper's offering or prayers.

This MESSAGE has no subtopics.

Interpretation

CHAPTER 21

Verse 16. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying,**

This MESSAGE introduces another MESSAGE of Jehovah to Moses.

Verse 17. **Speak to Aaron, saying, A man of your seed unto your generations who has a blemish must not come to offer the bread of His God.**

This MESSAGE was to be delivered by Moses to Aaron. Possibly the reason why Moses was told to deliver the MESSAGE to Aaron rather than to all the priests was that the high priest was responsible for supervising the priests to prevent any priest with a blemish from serving at the altar. The practice was to continue for generations into the future, but the statement is not literally "throughout your generations." The wording is literally "to your generations," which leaves open the possibility that God could discontinue the practice at some time in the future, which he did in Christ. "To offer the bread of God," means to officiate over altar offerings. The actual "bread of God" was the portion of an offering that was

roasted on the altar or eaten by the priests and their families. Those portions were God's part of a fellowship meal that He enjoyed with the worshiper. That expression did not mean that God was dependent on being fed by his worshiper or else he would go hungry, as the pagans believed about their gods. (see comments on Lev. 3:1 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading a slaughter-offering of peace offerings and on Lev. 21:6 in MESSAGE 25).

Verse 18-20. **18 For any man who has a blemish must not come near—a man blind or lame or condemned or mutilated,**

19. Or a man who has a damaged foot or a damaged hand,

20. Or a crooked back or [is] shrunken, or a man with a defect in his eyes, or an itch or psoriasis or a severed testicle,

Physical blemishes that prevented a man from serving at the altar are listed in these verses. The meaning of "blind" and "lame" are well known and easily understood. The word translated "condemned" is the word used to refer to a person or a group of people who were condemned to death because they had absolutely and deliberately rejected Jehovah as their God. It has usually been interpreted to mean "mutilated," "damaged," or "broken"; but that understanding makes the word mean the same as the word that follows it. Interpreters try to make a distinction by supposing that the first applies to the face, while the second applies to the limbs. Those distinctions are not in the meaning of the words, so it is best to hold to the meaning that the word has in all other passages where it is found. Some reject the usual meaning of the word on the basis that a priest would not be guilty of such an offense, but Nadab and Abihu were (Lev. 10:1-3). A stronger reason for rejecting the usual meaning would be that condemnation to death and destruction is not a physical blemish. However, it certainly is a terrible condition.

The meanings of "damaged foot" and "damaged hand" are clear. The word translated "crooked" is translated "humpback" in most English translations, but the word literally means "twisted." It probably refers to a crooked spine. The word translated "shrunken" is often translated as "dwarf," but the word literally means "small" or "thin." It

might refer to a dwarf, but it more likely referred to a person who was bent or emaciated.

"A defect in his eyes" probably refers to a damaged eye or to being cross eyed, rather than to imperfect sight. The word translated "itch" occurs only two other times in the Old Testament (Lev. 22:22; Deut. 28:27). Neither of those references gives much of a clue as to its meaning, but it is usually understood to refer to a rash that causes serious itching. The word translated "psoriasis" occurs only in this verse and in Leviticus 22:22. It is generally understood to refer to some kind of a disease that causes red and scaly patches on the skin.

Probably the most problematical term in the list of blemishes is translated "severed testicle" above. Both Hebrew words in the phrase are found only in this verse in the whole Old Testament. One of the words almost surely means "testicle." The other word means "rubbed off" or perhaps "squeezed off." The phrase likely refers to castration, a practice that was somewhat common among pagans of that day. It may refer to a method of castrating human males that was done by tying off the testicles to cut off circulation to them until they died and were easily removed from the body.

Whatever the exact meaning of some of the words, clearly the blemishes could be caused by birth defects, injury, or illness. When the blemish was caused by an injury, apparently it could result from an accident or a deliberate action. Some of the blemishes possibly were able to be corrected in some cases, especially those caused by diseases. Correcting or healing the blemish would then allow the priest to serve again at the altar and in The Tent of Meeting.

Verse 21. **Any man of the seed of Aaron the priest who has a blemish must not come near to offer Jehovah's fire-offerings. [One who has] a blemish must not come near to offering the bread of his God.**

This statement is inclusive of any kind of physical blemish that a man of the priestly family might have. Probably the list of blemishes in verses 18-20 was not meant to be all inclusive, but to illustrate the kinds of blemishes that would prevent a man of the priestly family from serving at the altar.

Because God is perfect in every aspect of His being, any kind of physical imperfection would prevent a man from being a fit symbol of God's receiving the worship of His people.

Verse 22. **He may eat the bread of his God of the holiness of holinesses and of the holinesses.**

A man of the priestly family who had a physical blemish could eat of the offerings and gifts which were set aside for the support of the priests and their families. It is specifically stated that he could eat both holinesses (holy foods) and holiness of holinesses (most holy foods). Holy food could be eaten by the priests and their families in their homes, and most holy foods could be eaten only by the priests in the court of The Tabernacle (see comments on Lev. 2:3 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading [It is] a holiness of holinesses, on Lev. 5:15 in MESSAGE 3 under the heading against holy items belonging to Jehovah; on Lev. 6:16 in MESSAGE 5 under the heading It must be eaten in The Holy Place. They must eat it in the court of the Tent of Meeting, on Lev. 6:17 in MESSAGE 5, and on Lev. 6:26-30; 7:6-7 in MESSAGE 7). Permission for a priest with a blemish to eat of both the holy foods and most holy foods showed that a priest with a physical blemish was still loved and received by God. He was still a priest and still belonged to the group that was separated out for full time service to Jehovah. Even though he could not officiate at the altar, he could still serve in many ways. Thus, he still deserved support as a person hallowed to the service of Jehovah, and was entitled to eat of the priest's portions of the offerings.

Verse 22. **But he must not come near the veil. He must not come near the altar when he has a blemish, so that he will not make My Holinesses common, for I am Jehovah who hallows them.**

A priest with a physical blemish was prohibited from two places of service. The first was to "come near the veil." This prohibition means he was not to enter the outer room of The Tabernacle of Meeting and stand before the veil that separated it from the most holy portion of The Tabernacle (see comments on Lev. 4:6 in MESSAGE 2). The

second was to "come near the altar." This prohibition means he was not to officiate over a fire-offering. For him to perform either of these services would make God's "Holinesses" common or secular.

The word "Holiness" was used to refer to any object that was made holy by being dedicated to Jehovah's use (see comments on Lev. 12:4 in MESSAGE 15 under the heading The Holiness). Since the word is used in the plural here, the reference seems to have been to both holy objects that a priest with blemishes was forbidden to handle, that is, the tent portion of The Tabernacle and the altar of rededication-offerings. This explanation is much more consistent with other uses of the word "Holiness" and with the context than understanding it to refer to several parts of The Tabernacle.

The priests were to take care not to make The Tent of Meeting and the altar common, because keeping it holy was commanded to them by Jehovah, who had made them holy to His service.

Verse 24. **So Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.**

This verse is a concluding Summary Note, added by Moses to show how he carried out the instructions that had been given to him. It is consistent with other Summary Notes found throughout the Book of Leviticus (see comments on Lev. 11:46-47 in MESSAGE 14). In verse 2, Jehovah told Moses to speak this MESSAGE to Aaron, because he had a special responsibility to see that it was carried out; however, those instructions were not intended to imply that only Aaron was to know about it. When Moses carried out the instructions Jehovah had given to him, he relayed the MESSAGE to Aaron, to Aaron's sons, and to all the children of Israel. Obviously, Moses did not understand Jehovah's instruction to mean that only Aaron was to know about this MESSAGE, because Moses told it to all the priests and all the people. The people needed to know about the priests' duties, so they would know how to follow them. Moses obeyed the instructions Jehovah gave him and went beyond them, knowing that his additional action was certainly not outside of Jehovah's will.

Application

Since the requirements of this MESSAGE were for symbolic purposes that were connected with The Tabernacle offerings that now have been abolished, the disqualifications listed do not apply to the Christian ministry. No physical blemish or disability can disqualify a person from ministering to Jehovah today, as long as that person has the strength for the responsibilities that are involved. However, the instructions in this MESSAGE should be understood to teach that a person who serves in any aspect of Christian ministry should be spiritually whole and mature. A person with weak, immature, faulty, or blemished character will bring shame on the ministry and on the Lord. Such a man is not qualified to serve in the ministry of the holy and perfect God.