

OUTSIDE THE CAMP

A Devotional Meditation on Tazria (She Bears Seed) and Metzora (The Leper)

Leviticus 12:1-15:33; 2 Kings 5:1-19, 7:3-20; John 10:14-18; Hebrews 13:11-13

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Parents know that children get messy even when they're not trying. When they're little, they have diapers that need changing, noses that run, dinner plates that mysteriously end up on the floor, and face plants into mud puddles. When they're older, they have sports uniforms that get stained with mud, blood, and grass, and they make kitchens and bathrooms explode. That's why many parents give up any hope of having nice things in a clean house until the children grow up and leave.

But then they come back with grandchildren.

It's not just children. Life is messy. Those times when we get cleaned up and make ourselves presentable are rare. We used to make a big deal about dressing up for church every week, and for traveling, and even going to work. Times change, though, and we have a much more relaxed standard of what's acceptable. Even so, there is a standard, and those who can't or won't measure up to it might find themselves cast out of polite company.

The middle chapters of Leviticus explain why a person can be excluded from society. Often it's because of the normal messy things of life, such as giving birth to a child, or in sickness when nasty things start leaking out of our bodies. In those cases, separation from people is a good thing. What new mother, for instance, would want to be out and about immediately after delivering her baby? And what sick person would want to endure the discomfort and embarrassment of sharing their condition with others? That's why God specified what to do in those messy times, and what it would take to be reintegrated into community life.

God also explains how to be ritually cleansed for participation in the Temple service. The protocols for drawing near to the Lord's table – his altar – are still in force. One day, perhaps soon, we'll understand better what that means when there's a new Temple in Jerusalem. For now, it's enough to understand that our God is holy, set apart from his creation, and that he expects us to approach him with reverence.

It's helpful to remember why our Creator is set apart. That's the result of the decision by our first ancestors to challenge the Creator's protocols and establish standards of their own. Each generation has made similar choices. The Creator responded by establishing the barrier of separation between us and him. The separation was for our own protection, so that we would not be annihilated through unfiltered exposure to his infinite purity in our impure state.

And yet, God never intended that the separation would endure forever. There are lessons we had to learn through the messy process of separation and maturity. That's

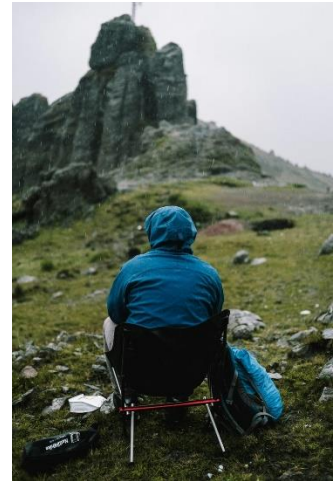


Photo by romboide, San Marcos, Guatemala, August 18, 2022, [on Unsplash](#).

why he couldn't overlook our messiness and welcome us back with open arms until something made us clean. It's the same reason a mother tells her child covered in mud and sweat to take a bath before she lets him give her a kiss. She also reminds him to stay off the furniture. The boy may chafe at his mother's instructions, but in time he'll realize that she's trying to keep her home in order for the good of the whole family.

This is why God gave Israel the Temple protocols. The sacrifices and purification rites provided a measure of sanctity by which the people could draw near and get a glimpse of what life will be like when we once again are allowed to walk with our Creator through his garden in the cool of the day. Israel was supposed to model this lesson for the whole world, and in fact they did. They still do. That's one of the reasons the God of Abraham has gone to great lengths to preserve the Jewish people as the visible remnant of Israel and proof that he not only exists, but comes through on his promises. The camp of Israel in the form of the Jewish State has been reconstituted on the land God gave to Abraham and his descendants, just as God promised.

So where does that leave us who aren't Jewish? In a sense, we are outside the camp in the unclean places of the world. That's the picture we're supposed to see from those passages about leprosy and the outcasts afflicted with it. It's not about a skin condition; it's about a heart condition. Sometimes people get so messy in their ways of thinking that they can't help but make the wrong choices out of habit. They get so wrapped up in a chronic condition of ickiness that no one, not even their Maker, can stand to be around them. They are removed from the camp, so to speak, unless and until they can be cleansed and rehabilitated.

That's all of us, of course. We can't get into the camp because we're one big mess from head to toe. The only way we can even know we need to be cleansed is if someone from inside the camp comes out to help us.

That's what our Messiah did, as the letter to the Hebrews says:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

Hebrews 13:11-13 ESV

This letter is to us. We become Hebrews when we cross over with our Messiah to the place where we are cleansed and made new. Then he invites us to join him as he continues his work outside the camp gathering all the lost sheep still wandering in the unclean places.

One day very soon, the gathering will be finished and our Good Shepherd will lead this flock into the camp and join them to the flock already there. In the meantime, we've still got work to do here on the outside.