**The Water of Cleansing**

The semi-annual shoe migration will soon begin. This event occurs in the fall and spring as Michele swaps out her warm and cold weather shoes, a mammoth undertaking due to the large quantities involved. Just as youth is wasted on the young, Michele sees millipedes as wasting their many feet since they don’t wear shoes. She is merciless with her shoes, discarding them at the slightest sign of wear or a fickle change in fashion. I tend to keep my shoes well beyond their normal shelf life, I have a pair of hiking shoes that I have worn for 25 years. I can’t bear to throw them away because they are very comfortable so I keep repairing the soles with glue and wear them sparingly. In our study of Numbers chapter 19, God continues to prepare the Israelites for their journey through the desert to Canaan. God provided food, water and safety for them during the 40 year trip and in Duet. 29:5 we learn that God even provided special clothing and sandals for them that did not wear out. Their bodies would wear out before their clothing as God required the lives of those men aged 20 or older when they refused to enter Canaan. Since there were about 600,000 men who fit that description(and presumably their wives would die as well), death would be the constant companion of the Israelites as over 80 would die per day on average.

We recently completed our study of Leviticus which contains the multitude of laws God commanded the Israelites to obey. God devoted much attention to defining clean and unclean animals as well as requirements for personal cleanliness. Often someone who was regarded as unclean would have to offer an animal sacrifice as part of the cleansing process. One way a person could become unclean was by coming into contact with a dead body.

The chapter begins with God telling Moses and Aaron to have a red heifer brought to Eleazar which he would slaughter outside the camp, after which he would sprinkle some of the blood toward the Tent of Meeting then he would burn all parts of the heifer, including its blood. Two items of special note: First, the heifer was sacrificed by Eleazer who became unclean while performing his duty. Aaron could not do it because he was not allowed to become unclean (see Lev. 21:11). Note also that the animal was female rather than a male which was often used as a sacrifice. A male was used if the sacrifice was made for the priests or the people but a female could be used for an individual offering. A red heifer would have been very rare, its red blood of course symbolic of the shed blood of Jesus. After burning the heifer, its ashes were preserved for use in purification from sin. Apparently the purification using the ashes was reserved only for those who became unclean by touching a dead body. Someone who was unclean would be sprinkled with water mixed with the ashes by another person who was clean. This was done on the 3rd and 7th days after contact with a corpse.

What seems to be an odd ritual has some significant symbolism. As mentioned the red heifer is symbolic of Jesus and it is important that the animals blood was burned rather than drained which was the normal procedure. Having the blood as part of the ashes was an important part of the sacrifice. Rather than individual sacrifices of animals, the ashes from that one animal would be sufficient to atone for the sin of the entire nation just as the sacrifice of Jesus was sufficient for all. While the ashes seemed to have lasted for many years, ultimately additional animals had to be sacrificed to replenish the ashes. We would not normally think of coming into contact with a corpse as a sin but death is the result of sin so anyone exposed to a corpse was seen by God as taking on that sin thus the need for purification. The ashes were mixed with water to create their purifying power. When Jesus’ side was pierced after His crucifixion, blood mixed with water came out and John wrote that He came by water and blood (1st John 5:6). The water and the blood are the double cure for sin. Jehovah Jireh created a means by which someone could be cleaned without the involvement of a priest and an animal sacrifice. The sheer numbers of deaths would have made that impossible. I think God also used this to be a constant reminder that the wages of sin is death. He would not allow death to become an ordinary, daily event and the sprinkling on the 3rd and 7th day would have kept their attention.