

Childbirth and Atonement  
Leviticus 12:1-8  
Leviticus series #9  
June 26, 2022

### Introduction

Imagine: walk into a room, puddle of blood on floor. Assumption: death.

- But then you hear that precious, newborn cry coming from the other room. LIFE!
  - Side note: first newborn squawk that I ever heard was my sister
- Childbirth is an ordeal, a major life event
- For most of human history, a successful childbirth was to brush up near death
  - CDC in 2012, 6th leading cause of death among women (24-30) in the U.S.
    - That's with all of our advanced medicine
  - Throughout history, the leading cause of death for women
- Paradox: the preciousness of new life coming through such a close brush with death
- So, here in Leviticus, God gives his daughters a ritual/ceremony to mark the passage through this ordeal, and to offer cleansing and wholeness on the other side

### Important Levitical Concepts

1. Holy | Distinct, special, set apart, unique
  - a. Ultimately, God's holiness is what defines him
2. Common | Ordinary, regular, "profane"
  - a. Analogy: daily use dishes, special occasion dishes
  - b. God makes common things holy: time, spaces, objects, people
3. Clean/pure | Ready to become holy (prerequisite!)
  - a. *How do I draw near to God? Become holy like he is! But first, I have to be clean.*

**Jay Sklar** A modern analogy is that of physical health and cleanness. A person with the flu may not go into a hospital to hold a newborn baby, while a person who is healthy may. A person who is healthy **and** sterilized may go into an operating room, but a person who is simply healthy may not. Just as your physical health and cleanness determine what you can do and where you can go in a hospital, the Israelites' **ritual** state determined what they could do and where they could go in terms of **ritual** actions, places and times.

### Moral Impurity vs. Ritual Impurity

From an action	From a substance or object
Inherently wrong	Not inherently wrong
Avoidable	Unavoidable
Morality	Mortality

*Mortality = reminder of death. Look at the sources...*

## Sources of Ritual Impurity

1. Reproductive fluids | Leviticus 12, 15
2. Skin diseases | Leviticus 13-14
3. Contact with a corpse | Leviticus 21, Numbers 19

**Matthew Thiessen** These are natural human functions. The majority of Israelites would have at one time or another experienced such ritual impurities. Priestly legislation does not prohibit Israelites from contracting such impurities, nor does it punish them for doing so. Priestly law assumes that people will endure such impurities and provides them with the ritual means to remove those impurities. Only in the event that people do not properly dispose of their impurities does the issue become one of wrongdoing.

**Big idea:** Ritual purity is a reminder that we are mere mortals

- Maybe nowhere is this better displayed than in childbirth...

## Childbirth Rituals

**Leviticus 12** <sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.

- Hebrew word “weakness” | Recognition that women face significant difficulty

<sup>3</sup>And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

- Kosher last week, circumcision here

<sup>4</sup>Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed.

- *Analogy: taking all the antibiotics*

<sup>5</sup>But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation. And she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for sixty-six days.

- oK, wHaT?!?! More in a moment...

<sup>6</sup>“And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a **sin offering**,

- Hebrew *hatat* = purification offering (better translation than sin offering)

<sup>7</sup>and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female.

- Interesting that the sacrifice is the same, despite the differing

<sup>8</sup>And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean.”

- God’s grace and accommodation on display here

### Questions to Ask

1. Why would childbirth cause impurity? | Close contact with death
  - a. Even in a successful birth, long period of bleeding after, so a constant reminder
  - b. New life comes through a *sort-of* “death” | Life and death are inseparably linked
2. Why is atonement needed? | Atonement means things set right
  - a. Remember: “sin offering” is better translated as “purification offering”
  - b. Atonement *includes* forgiveness, but it’s broader: repayment and cleansing
    - i. Analogy: shower/bath after giving birth, but in a spiritual sense
3. Why are lengths different by gender? | No direct answer given

### Possible Reasons

1. Ancient medical beliefs
  - a. Medieval rabbi Ramban wrote that women bleed longer after girl babies???
  - b. Possible there’s something ancient, but it’s all mostly speculative
2. Reflects creation order | Jubilees 3:8-13
  - a. Also pretty speculative...
3. Time cut short for circumcision
  - a. *We would give you two weeks off, but 8th day is coming up soon...*
  - b. In the Bible, some laws have precedence over others
4. Pre-purification for future mothers

**Richard Hess** The ambiguity does not allow for conclusions that use this passage as a proof text for a patriarchal society in which boys have greater value than girls. There is simply too little known about the reasoning behind the procedures applied here. Further, as the following section suggests, the actual restoration of the mother to the sanctuary involves the same sacrifice, whether her child is male or female.

*Back to the point: I see so much of God's grace toward his daughters in this ritual ceremony. It's as if he's saying, "you've just brushed up against death in order to bring new life into the world. Take a break. After you've rested for a while, I'll make sure you know you're clean." What women go through in the act of childbirth is nothing short of miraculous. And it points to the nature of God in a remarkable way.*

**Big idea:** God brings new life out of death

- Nature: a seed falls to the ground and dies, but then brings forth new life
- Exodus story: passed through the waters of death to come into new life
- Ultimately: we see this in the person and work of Jesus
  - Mary knew this passage...

### Mary's Purification

**Luke 2** <sup>21</sup>When the eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus—the name given by the angel before he was conceived. <sup>22</sup>And when the days of their purification according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to

the Lord <sup>23</sup> (just as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord”) <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons”).

- Jesus came, fulfilled every law perfectly, in order to face the powers of death
- Death has a perfect track record: not just women in childbirth, but every one of us
  - Well, almost...

### **The Death of Death**

**2 Timothy 1** <sup>10</sup> Our Savior Christ Jesus...has abolished death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

- The pool of blood on the ground under the cross is not just death, it's life
- So now, when you trust in Jesus, your relationship with life and death is different

### **Jesus' Death Brings Life**

**2 Corinthians 4** <sup>10</sup> We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body.

**Big idea:** God brings new life out of death

- Jesus passed through death and came through on the other side
- One day, the world in its present form will die, and new world will be reborn
- Until then, we face daily deaths, daily blood. But in those moments, God brings new life
- Some of the most painful growth in personal life comes through daily deaths

### **Die Every Day**

**Luke 9** <sup>23</sup> If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will save it.

*This week, you will face multiple thousands of moments that can feel like small deaths. And in every one of those moments, you have the possibility of drawing from the life of Jesus. Die to yourself, and let his life work in you.*