

New Birth & Cleansing

1. New Birth

¹There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

³Jesus answered and said to him, “**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**”

⁴Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

⁵Jesus answered, “**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.** ⁶**That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.** ⁷**Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’** ⁸**The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.**” (John 3:1-8)

The Lord Jesus informed Nicodemus that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, a person must be born again. Just as the first birth is necessary for physical life, so a second birth is necessary for divine life. We become children in a physical sense by *natural* birth. To become a child of God, one must have a *spiritual* birth; this is known as the new birth. Just as there are two parents for physical birth, new birth is produced by the word of God and the Holy Spirit.¹ Water in this passage (verse 5) is the figure of the word (Psalm 119:9-11; John 15:3; Ephesians 5:25-26), which the Spirit of God uses for the quickening of souls. The following passages demonstrate this fact: 1 Corinthians 4:15; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23. The Holy Spirit is the *Agent* in new birth, and the word of God is the *instrument*. Titus 3:5 describes the new birth as the “washing of regeneration of the Holy Spirit” (compare with John 13:10; Hebrews 10:22), and in 2nd Thessalonians 2:13 and 1st Peter 1:2 it is called the “sanctification of the Spirit.”



¹ New birth “is not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). It is a work of God in the heart through sovereign grace alone: “**No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him**” (John 6:44). The unregenerate *cannot* come by *nature* (Jeremiah 13:23; Romans 8:7-8; 1 Corinthians 2:14), and *will not* come by *practise* (Matthew 22:3; 23:37; John 5:40).

New Birth & Cleansing

A child inherits the nature of the parents, and so does the child of God. Through new birth we become **partakers of the divine nature** (2 Peter 1:4). In other words, new birth involves the reception of a new nature by the Spirit.² This new nature is absolutely holy, as the old nature is absolutely corrupt. The new nature fits man to be in the presence of God. Colossians 1:13 says that the Father **has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light**; this is by the new birth.

Our spiritual origin is described in 1st Peter 1:23, where it states that we have **been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever** (see also 1 John 3:9). Natural life begins with conception, and new birth begins with the implanted word germinated by the Spirit — in other words, the impartation of the new nature. This divine life grows into faith and obedience to the truth, in the same way that a baby develops in the womb. And just like a baby becomes a member of the family when it is born, so we become children of God when we receive Christ (John 1:12). Our response to the gospel (emphasized in 1st Peter 1:22), according to the desire stemming from the new nature imparted to us, is the final step of the new birth process.³ Of course, as born again children of God, we are henceforth responsible to walk in newness of life.

When a sinner believes in the Lord Jesus, he is sealed (Ephesians 1:13) and indwelt (Romans 8:11) by the Holy Spirit. The seal is a mark of ownership and security, and the indwelling presence of the Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance. As the seal, He guarantees that we ourselves will be kept safely for the inheritance; as the earnest, He guarantees that the inheritance will be kept safely for us! These confirming operations of the Spirit linked to the new birth process can be likened to a real estate transaction. The Holy Spirit builds the house (sanctification of the Spirit), signs the deed (sealing of the Spirit), and then He Himself moves in (indwelling of the Spirit). There may not always be an appreciable difference in time between these events in our dispensation, although many people go through a deep exercise of heart before believing in the Lord Jesus.



² New birth does not involve the altering of our old nature, but the impartation of a nature which is entirely new. **That** [i.e. the nature] **which is born of the Spirit is spirit**; it partakes of the nature of the One by Whom it is born.

³ We first see the kingdom of God by the illumination of the Spirit (John 3:3), and then we *enter* by faith (John 3:5).

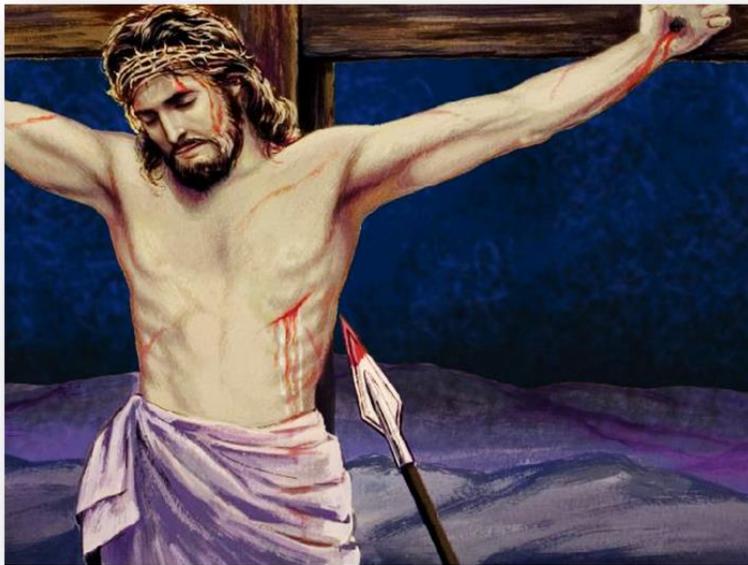
New Birth & Cleansing

2. Cleansing

2.1 Once-for-All Cleansing by Water and Blood

2.1.1 1 John 5:6-8

This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. (1 John 5:6-8)



- John is alluding to the event that he witnessed in John 19:33-35. When the soldiers saw that the Lord Jesus had already died, one of them pierced His side, and immediately blood and water came out.⁴
- The water and the blood signify two inseparable results of the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross:
 - Water — Purification
 - Blood — Propitiation (or expiation)
- The water provides *moral cleansing*, and the blood provides *judicial cleansing* (**having now been justified by His blood** — Romans 5:9). The water cleanses us from the defilement and pollution of our sin, and the blood cleanses us from the guilt and penalty of our sins. Both are equally necessary, and both come from the pierced side of the Lord Jesus (i.e. His death on the cross).

⁴ This epistle is an answer to incipient Gnosticism. In the first place, the water and the blood witness to the true Manhood of the Lord Jesus. The Son of God came among us in flesh and blood (John 1:14; Hebrews 2:14). It was a real and true Man (who at the same time was God) who actually died and whose death is effectual to save sinners. This fact was never more clearly established than when the blood and water poured out of His side. His death on the cross was no “ghostly” apparition as the Gnostics would have, but a real work by Christ come in the flesh.

New Birth & Cleansing

This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ

- The word for “by” in Greek is dia: “by means of; through”. This is a preposition indicating accompaniment and instrumentality — Christ’s first coming to make an atonement for sin was *characterized by* and made *effective through* water and blood.
- This means that He came in order to offer moral cleansing and expiation through His death.

Not only by water, but by water and blood

- John stresses that we cannot become morally cleansed (i.e. purified; made fit for God’s presence) apart from the shed blood of the Lord Jesus on the cross; our moral cleansing is based on an effectual expiation, of which the blood speaks. The Lord Jesus had to die on the cross and shed His blood to impart eternal life to believers.⁵
- The moral cleansing of the water characterises the work produced in us by the Holy Spirit — the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5) — new birth. The blood speaks of the work accomplished for us by the death of Christ, whereby we can be forgiven. New birth is vitally linked with the death of Christ; it cannot be separated from the work of atonement on the cross.
- These two aspects of our cleansing show us that the Lord Jesus died for our sin (singular) and also for our sins (plural). In other words, the Lord Jesus died for what we are (i.e. born of Adam, in a nature characterized by sin) and also for what we have done.

2.1.2 Cleansing by Water

The following New Testament passages teach that we are washed with water. In each case, the water cleanses us from our sinful condition so that we are made fit for God’s presence:⁶

Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word. (Ephesians 5:25-26, ESV)

...not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having...our bodies washed with pure water. (Hebrews 10:22)



⁵ The Gnostics denied the atoning value of Christ’s death, and taught that salvation could be attained only through the knowledge revealed to those who were initiated into their secrets. They claimed to have fellowship with God, and that as His children through the bestowal of the Spirit they had no sin or further need for cleansing (compare with 1 John 1:5-10).

⁶ Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness **no one will see the Lord**.

New Birth & Cleansing

2.1.3 Cleansing by Blood



Other New Testament scriptures link the theme of cleansing with the blood of Christ.⁷ In all these verses the subject is cleansing from the guilt and penalty of our sins:

...who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Hebrews 1:3)

...how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)

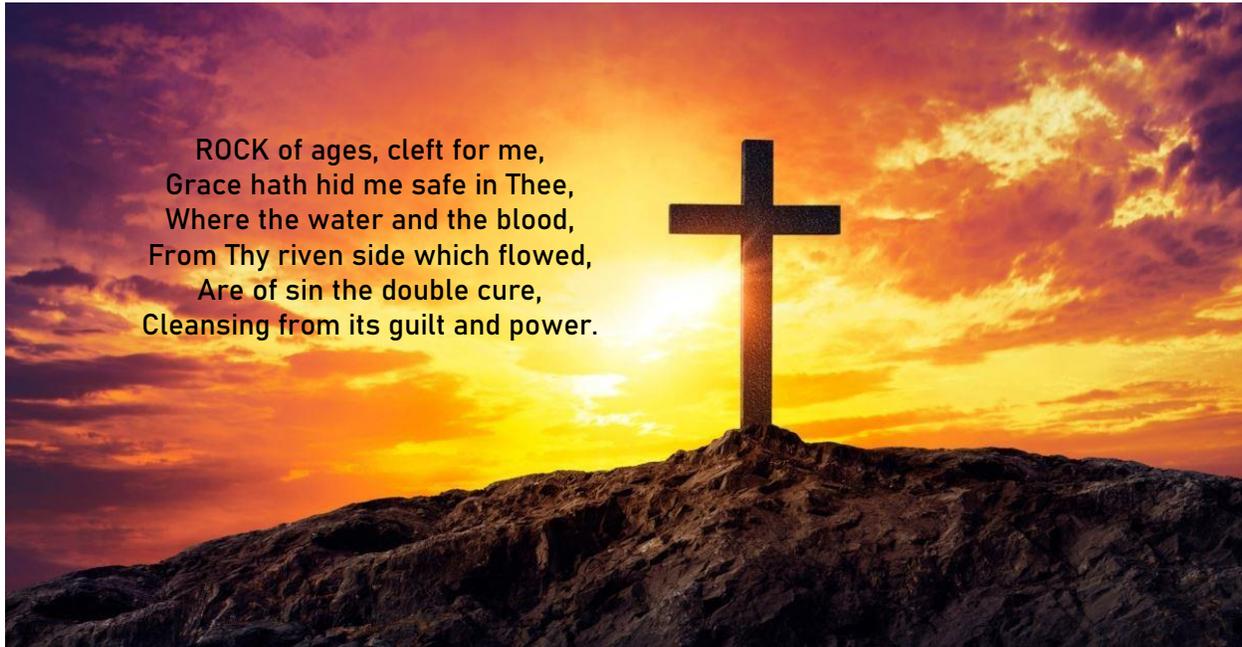
...and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all [every] sin. (1 John 1:7)

⁷ In the Scriptures, bathing and washing are always with water, while blood is always applied by sprinkling (Hebrews 9:13, 19, 21; 10:22; 11:28; 12:24). There are two apparent exceptions in the book of Revelation:

1. The NKJV translates Revelation 1:5, **“To Him who loves us and washed [bathed, as in John 13:10] us from our sins in his own blood.”** This verse should be translated according to the alternate reading, **“To Him who loves us and has freed [loosed] us from our sins by His blood.”**
2. In Revelation 7:14 the redeemed multitude **washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.** Robes represent behaviour or conduct (Revelation 19:8). In virtue of the blood of the Lamb which had saved them, they cleansed themselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 7:1) through the daily washing of water by the word.

New Birth & Cleansing

Taken together, these New Testament verses (describing our cleansing by water and blood) highlight our need for both moral cleansing from our sin, and judicial cleansing from our sins. The cleansing by water deals with the root of our uncleanness (our sinful nature) and the blood cleanses from the resulting fruit (the sins we have committed). Both are equally necessary, and both come from the riven side of the Lord Jesus:



ROCK of ages, cleft for me,
Grace hath hid me safe in Thee,
Where the water and the blood,
From Thy riven side which flowed,
Are of sin the double cure,
Cleansing from its guilt and power.

New Birth & Cleansing

2.2 Ongoing Cleansing by Water⁸

While we continue to live in a sinful world we need ongoing moral cleansing from the defilement we acquire on a daily basis:

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Corinthians 7:1)

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

Through new birth we experience the one-time moral cleansing which places us in an unchanging *position* as a child of God, but we also need continual moral cleansing in *practise* when we are defiled by sin in our lives. God uses the same washing agent for our ongoing moral cleansing that He uses in new birth — the word in the power of the Spirit:

⁹How can a young man cleanse his way?

By taking heed according to Your word.

¹⁰With my whole heart I have sought You;

Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!

¹¹Your word I have hidden in my heart,

That I might not sin against You. (Psalm 119:9-11)



You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. (John 15:3)

The Holy Spirit has come to guide us into all truth (John 16:13). He applies the word⁹ to our consciences in order to bring us to repentance and confession of guilt. The lives of believers are cleansed as they hear the words of Christ and obey them. Jesus' prayer for His disciples was for His Father to **"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth"** (John 17:17).

⁸ Our judicial cleansing has been completed by the one offering of Christ, and never needs to be repeated. When we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, we receive eternal forgiveness from the penalty of our sins (past, present and future) through His shed blood:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. (Ephesians 1:7)

...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:10)

For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14)

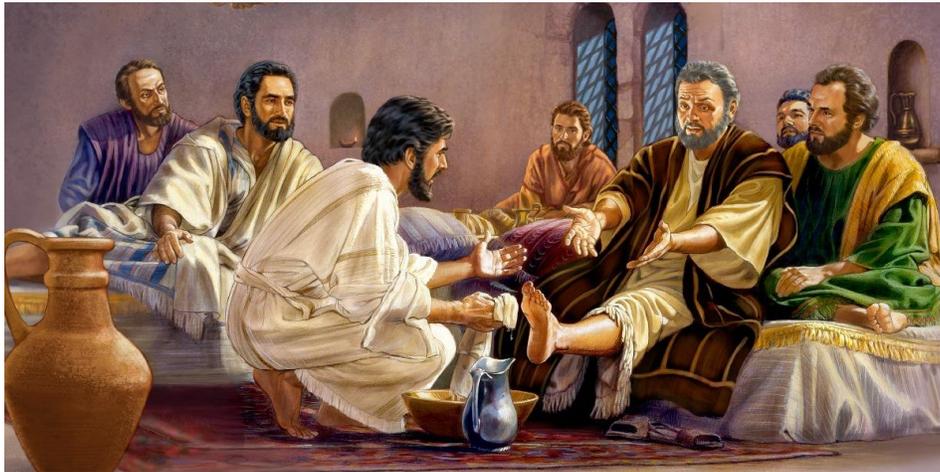
⁹ The Word of God according to Hebrews 4:12 is **living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.**

New Birth & Cleansing

2.2.1 Twofold Aspect of Cleansing by Water

The twofold aspect of cleansing by water is illustrated in John's Gospel chapter 13:1-10. This passage demonstrates the Lord Jesus' example of service and humiliation when he washes the disciple's feet. Peter protested when Jesus came to wash his feet:

⁶Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" ⁷Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." ⁸Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." ⁹Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean."



The Greek verb used for washing throughout verses 1-9 of this passage is *nipō*, "to cleanse" (especially the hands, feet or face). In verse 10 Jesus uses a different Greek verb, *louō*,¹⁰ meaning "to bathe" (the whole person). This once-for-all bathing takes place when we are born again. Through it we become completely clean (verse 10).

However, even if we have been bathed we still need our feet to be washed. Otherwise we can have no part with the Lord Jesus (verse 8). New birth brings us into a relationship with God as His children that can never change, but if we have unconfessed sin in our lives we cannot have fellowship with the Lord.

"When a child disobeys his father or mother, he still remains their child. Their relationship stems from birth and cannot be changed or undone. But a child who has been naughty cannot be happy or close to his father – there is a distance between them. It is the same with the believer that has sinned. He remains a child of God, that is true; but he has been disobedient and thus cannot be happy. He has no liberty to pray and misses communion with the Father. To regain communion, he must confess his sin; he must speak up. He should not come as a lost sinner to God, but rather as a child to his Father." (House of Gold, J. Rouw)

¹⁰ *Louō* is the word used to describe that our bodies have been washed with pure water in Hebrews 10:22. Its noun form *loutron* is the word used in Ephesians 5:26 to describe the washing of water by the word, and in Titus 3:5 to describe the washing of regeneration.

New Birth & Cleansing

2.3 Summary

- Our once-for-all cleansing is by water and blood, which both come from the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross.
- The water provides *moral cleansing* from our sin (singular), and the blood provides *judicial cleansing* from our sins (plural).
- The cleansing by water deals with the *root* of our uncleanness (our sinful nature) and the blood cleanses from the resulting *fruit* (the sins we have committed).
- Our moral cleansing removes the defilement of our sin (what we are). Moral cleansing is based on an effectual expiation, and allows us to be fit for God's presence. There are two aspects to moral cleansing:
 - One-time aspect — washing of regeneration of the Holy Spirit (new birth).
 - Ongoing aspect — repeated foot washing.
- Our judicial cleansing removes the guilt and penalty of our sins (what we have done). This is once-for-all, and requires no repetition.



...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience (judicial cleansing) and our bodies washed with pure water (moral cleansing). (Hebrews 10:22)

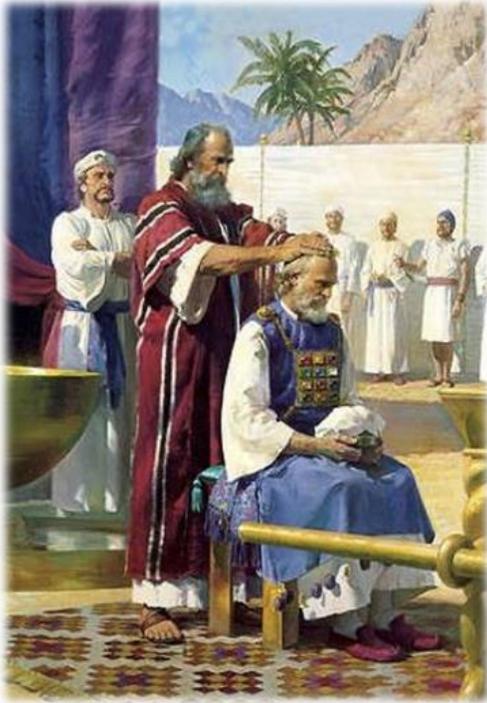
...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit (moral cleansing), for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ (judicial cleansing): Grace to you and peace be multiplied. (1 Peter 1:2)

This is He who came by water (moral cleansing) and blood (judicial cleansing)—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. (1 John 5:6)

New Birth & Cleansing

3. Old Testament Examples

3.1 The Consecration of the Priests and the Bronze Laver



In Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8 we read about the consecration of the priests. The priesthood of the sons of Aaron depended upon their relationship to him. Without Aaron they could not be priests at all. Our relationship to Christ constitutes us priests. The first part of their consecration, before they could serve as priests in the tabernacle, was the washing with water: **“And Aaron and his sons you shall bring to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall wash them with water”** (Exodus 29:4). This once time washing of water is the type of the new birth. The death of the sacrificial animals and the sprinkling of blood were intimately linked to the consecration and cleansing of the priests, just as the Lord Jesus came **“not only by water, but by water and blood”** (1 John 5:6). This Old Testament example reinforces that our moral cleansing (new birth) is based on an effectual expiation.

Whenever the priests served God in the tabernacle after their consecration they had to wash their hands and feet in the bronze laver (Exodus 30:17-21). Through their daily service (such as offering sacrifices) their hands would have become dirty, and their feet needed constant washing since they walked through the desert sand. This speaks of the ongoing cleansing the believer needs when we are defiled by sin through our actions and walk.



New Birth & Cleansing

3.2 The Cleansing of the Leper

¹Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing: He shall be brought to the priest. ³And the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall examine *him*; and indeed, *if* the leprosy is healed in the leper, ⁴then the priest shall command to take for him who is to be cleansed two living *and* clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop. ⁵And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water. ⁶As for the living bird, he shall take it, the cedar wood and the scarlet and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird *that was* killed over the running water. ⁷And he shall sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed from the leprosy, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird loose in the open field. (Leviticus 14:1-7)



- The two birds in the law of the leper’s cleansing represent Christ’s death and resurrection — **“who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification”** (Romans 4:25).
- The first bird was killed over running [literally “fresh” or “living”] water in an earthen vessel. The earthen vessel typifies Christ’s Incarnation: **“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same”** (Hebrews 2:14). Christ was **“crucified in weakness”** (2 Corinthians 13:4); 1st Peter 3:18 says that He was **put to death in the flesh**. In the Scriptures the Holy Spirit is typified by rivers of living water (John 7:37-39); the bird that was killed over the running water symbolises how Christ **“through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God”** (Hebrews 9:14).
- The blood of the killed bird mingled¹¹ with the running water was sprinkled on the leper seven times for his cleansing. The running water represents the action of the Holy Spirit dealing with man, providing moral cleansing through new birth. The sprinkled blood represents judicial cleansing from the guilt and penalty of our sins.
- This Old Testament illustration emphasises that we need both water and blood for our cleansing. The cleansing by water deals with the root of our uncleanness (our sinful nature) and the blood cleanses from the resulting fruit (the sins we have committed).

⁸He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, and shall stay outside his tent seven days.⁹But on the seventh day he shall shave all the hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows— all his hair he shall shave off. He shall wash his clothes and wash his body in water, and he shall be clean. (Leviticus 14:8-9)

- After we are saved we must continually wash ourselves with the washing of water by the word (Ephesians 5:26) when we become defiled by sin through our behaviour or conduct.

¹¹ The two aspects of 1 John 5:6 are pictured through this.

New Birth & Cleansing

3.3 The Red Heifer

Numbers 19 gives us the ordinance of the red heifer, **“for purifying from sin”** (Numbers 19:9). The people of God were on their wilderness journey, and needed cleansing when they were defiled through contact with death. God told the children of Israel to slaughter a red heifer (which was without blemish or defect, and on which a yoke had never come) outside the camp. The heifer was then burned, and the ashes were stored in the camp. Anyone who touched a dead body was ceremonially unclean for seven days. In order to be cleansed, some of the ashes of the red heifer were mixed¹² with running [literally “fresh” or “living”] water in a vessel, and the water of purification was sprinkled on the unclean person.

The red heifer represents the Lord Jesus, who was perfect and holy, and who always delighted to do the will of His Father (Psalm 40:7-8).¹³ The heifer was sacrificed once-for-all, and the blood was sprinkled in sevenfold completeness in front of the tabernacle of meeting — a figure of the death of Christ.

Although we do not become ceremonially unclean through physical contact with death in our dispensation of grace, we need daily cleansing from moral uncleanness when we become defiled by sin in our walk. This world is characterized by sin and death¹⁴, just as the wilderness that the children of Israel were passing through was not able to sustain life. Death entered the world through sin **“and thus spread to all men, because all sinned”** (Romans 5:12). Romans 6:23 and 1st Corinthians 15:56 confirm God’s decree in Genesis 2:17 that death is the penalty of sin. Death is defiling because it is the manifestation and result of sin. Cleansing from the defilement caused by sin is through the washing of the water of the word, applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit (figured once again by the running water).

In this Old Testament picture we see that our ongoing moral cleansing is based on an effectual expiation; the ashes were the memorial of an already accepted work. If the person who was defiled did not purify himself according to the prescribed manner, he was to be cut off from Israel (Numbers 19:13, 20). Unless we experience the repeated moral cleansing of the washing of water by the word when we become defiled by sin in our walk, we forfeit communion with God, and may ultimately lose practical fellowship with the people of God. **“If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me”** (John 13:8).



¹³For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:13-14)

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

¹² The two aspects of 1 John 5:6 are pictured through this.

¹³ A yoke is put on an animal to restrain the wild nature, to bring it to subjection.

¹⁴ Believers likewise still carry the flesh, compared to a dead body in its corruption (Romans 7:24).