

Leviticus Chapter 13

Leprosy

The general description of the infections in this and the next chapter are labeled with the Hebrew word צָרַעַת (*tzar'at*).

Although the word literally means “to strike,” it is almost always (34 times in NASV) translated *leprosy*. This is actually an unfortunate translation, since what is currently called leprosy (Hansen’s disease) would only be one of many diseases that disrupt the skin. The diagnosis of leprosy meant that the person had an incurable disease which was evident in the skin. The symptoms described in this section are not sufficient to diagnose precisely the various skin conditions as labeled by today’s dermatologists. [Picture from www.trekearth.com.]



What is called leprosy in the Bible disfigured its victims but did not disable them. Naaman was able to carry on as general of the Syrian army, even though he was a leper (2 Kings 5:1, 27). Both Old and New Testament lepers seem to be able to move about freely. The lepers who were healed by Christ were not lame or bedridden. So this leprosy is clearly a broad classification of disease or an expression of the disease not common today.

[The picture is of Jesus healing a leper from www.classicalhebrew.com.]

But the priest was not a doctor. He functioned more as a public health officer. His task was not to treat the disease but rather to label it as clean or unclean. The basic process was:

1. A preliminary indication of symptoms – *when a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or a scab or a bright spot* (13:2)
2. A priestly inspection or re-inspection after 7 days – *then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests* (13:2)
3. A statement of specific symptoms as determined by the priest – *if the hair in the infection has turned white and the infection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body* (13:3)
4. The priest’s diagnosis – clean or unclean – *it is an infection of leprosy; when the priest has looked at him, he shall pronounce him unclean* (13:3)

Chapter 13 can be divided into two main sections:

- 13:1-46 the diagnosis, treatment, and ceremonial cleansing of infectious skin diseases
- 13:47-59 the diagnosis, treatment and cleansing of “leprosy” in various garments

The first part of this chapter can be outlined as follows:

Leviticus 13:1-8 The First Skin Disease Series of Tests

This was for a bright spot on the skin.



Leviticus 13:9-17 The Second Skin Disease Series of Tests

This was for a white swelling with quick raw flesh in the swelling.

Leviticus 13:18-23 The Third Skin Disease Series of Tests

This was for a boil which is turned into a white, or a reddish-white, swelling or bright spot.

Leviticus 13:24-28 The Fourth Skin Disease Series of Tests

This was for a burn which has turned into a white, or a reddish-white swelling.

Leviticus 13:29-37 The Fifth Skin Disease Series of Tests

This was for an infection on the head or beard.

Leviticus 13:38-39 Identifying Clean Skin Disease

This included any bright spots on the skin.



Leviticus 13:40-44 Baldness and Skin Disease

This was when an infection occurs on a bald spot.

Leviticus 13:45-46 The Quarantine of the Unclean

The unclean “leper” had a pitiable life.

- *His clothes shall be torn*
- *The hair of his head shall be uncovered*
- *He shall cover his mustache and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’*
- *He shall remain unclean all the days during which he has the infection*
- *He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp*

The last part of this chapter deals with clothing.



Leviticus 13:47-59 “Leprosy” in Garments

It is hard to tell what this was. Most commentators say this was some form of mold or mildew. Of course, that is because we don’t know what else it could be. But it was treated as something much more significant. At any rate it proves that the word *leprosy* had a very broad meaning.

Here is what was to be done with the contaminated article:

1. It must be shown to the priest (13:49).
2. The priest would isolate it for 7 days (13:50).
3. If the mark on the garment spread, it would be called unclean and burned (13:51-52).
4. If the mark had not spread, it would be washed and held for another 7 days (13:53-54).
5. If the mark was still present, the garment would be burned (13:55).
6. If the mark had faded after being washed, only the mark would be cut out (13:56).
7. If the mark reoccurred, then the garment must be burned (13:57).

THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

The most significant practice emerging from these chapters is quarantining the sick. This practice preserved the Jew through sicknesses like the Black Plague in Europe of the 1300s and 1400s. While the life span in general dipped into the 40s, the Jews were still living into their 70s. It was because the Jews washed their hands before they ate and quarantined the sick. It is interesting that Leviticus does not tell them to treat the sick person. Leviticus 13:45-46 sounds almost cruel. But if they had nurtured the sick, they would have spread the disease. The priority was protecting the healthy people and honoring the holiness of God. Paul uses the same reasoning concerning the spiritually sick in 1 Corinthians 5. The priority was not the unrepentant sinner but the healthy believers. His command

was for the Corinthian believers to quarantine the unrepentant sinner, who was a so-called believer, because *a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough* (1 Corinthians 5:6).