

Leviticus Chapter 12

Purification after Childbirth



Leviticus 12:1 *Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* First, I'd like to comment on this familiar formula introduction of a new subject. This phrase occurs 26 times in the book of Leviticus and it's usually the indication of a new chapter. The same phrase is common in Exodus and Numbers (the phrase does not occur in Genesis or Deuteronomy). It emphasizes the nature of the book as

- Direct revelation from God
- Verbal revelation from God
- Revelation from God given only to Moses

[Above photo from www.swedishamerican.org]

Leviticus 12:2-4 *Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: "When a woman gives birth and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall remain in the blood of her purification for thirty-three days; she shall not touch any consecrated thing, nor enter the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed."*



The uncleanness of the woman giving birth is related to the uncleanness of her menstruation and the blood of her purification. After seven days of uncleanness, she was to circumcise the boy, then remain unclean for 33 more days, for a total of 40 days of uncleanness. During this time she could not participate in the worship activities of the Tabernacle. [Picture from www.quolkids.com.]

One might ask: "How, or why, does having a baby render a woman *unclean*? The answer is: As with many "natural" bodily functions, the menstruation/blood process is offensive to the holiness of God.

During this period, on the 8th day, her only responsibility was to circumcise the baby boy.

Circumcision was more connected to the Abrahamic than the Mosaic Covenant. God told Abraham:

This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations (Genesis 17:10-12).

Leviticus 112:5 *But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; and she shall remain in the blood of her purification for sixty-six days.*

If she had a girl, the uncleanness period was twice as long – 80 days. So she is banned from participation in the Tabernacle worship for nearly 3 months. Why so much longer for a girl than for a boy? No reason is given. Several have been suggested. Here are a few – with my comments:

- The postnatal discharge may have lasted longer with girls – but it wouldn't last 80 days, or even twice as long.
- The female child would someday be subject to female discharges – but male children will also some day have discharges, which render them unclean.

- The order of creation was the man first and the woman as a helper – true, but childbirth eventually required a sin offering (12:6-8), so it seems to go beyond the creation order.
- There was a stigma on women for Eve’s part in the Fall – the Fall is the likely source, but there was a stigma on everyone because of Adam’s part in the Fall (Romans 5:12-17).
- The Fall placed Eve in subjection to her husband – this I think is most likely, Paul even carries this reasoning in to the Church Age (Genesis 3:16; 1 Corinthians 11:3).

Leviticus 12:6-8 Childbirth Requires a Sin Offering to Make Atonement for the Mother

When the days of her purification are completed, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the doorway of the tent of meeting a one year old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering (12:6).



[Picture of this offering by Mary and Joseph with Jesus from timothyministries.org.]

Verse 7 adds that this is to *make atonement for her*. Verse 8 says poor people could offer *two turtledoves or two young pigeons ... one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering...*

THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS

- There are two lingering questions from this chapter. The first is: “Why does childbirth require a period of purification followed by a sin offering for an atonement?” Having a baby is not sinful. Quite the opposite, it was commanded by God (Genesis 1:28). The baby was, of course, born with a sin nature like everybody, but that was not the consideration in Leviticus 12. This sin offering was for atonement of the mother, not the baby. And the reason was that the physical birth process offended the holiness of God. This is probably the most glaring example of the fallen state of nature (Romans 8:19-22) reflected in the natural processes of our own bodies. A woman cannot help her menstrual emissions, and a man cannot help his seminal emissions. Nonetheless, they offend a holy God.
- The second question that tends to bother us, especially today, is: “Why is having boys different than having girls?” The text never directly answers that question, so all we can do is guess, and that may not be a good idea (Deuteronomy 29:29). There is no statement or practice in the Old or New Testament of the Bible suggesting that either boys or girls are more important, more valuable, more spiritual, or more godly. It is only the godless societies, such as Arab Muslims, Indian Hindus, and Chinese Buddhists, who treat females as less valuable. But what the Bible does teach clearly from cover to cover is that males and females are different and should be treated differently – even from birth.
- This ceremony was carried out by Mary when she had Jesus. After Mary’s time of purification, they went to Jerusalem: *to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons”* (Luke 2:24). So apparently, Mary and Joseph were poor (hence the birds as an offering). And, although the conception was miraculous, the delivery, whereby Mary gave birth to Jesus, was not biologically different from anybody else’s delivery. In Luke 2 Mary was making a sin offering for herself after giving birth to the sinless God-man Jesus Christ.