

Daily Bread with Brother Hwa-Chi (Not reviewed by the speaker, for personal use only)

Numbers 5: 16-28

Brothers and sisters, peace be with you, this is Hwa-Chi. Thank God, it's time to read the Bible again. We continue to read Numbers chapter 5. Today we read from verse 16 to verse 28.

Yesterday we read that if a husband suspects his wife of adultery and there is no direct evidence nor any witness, he must bring his wife before the priest and offer the grain offering of jealousy — one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour, with no oil and no frankincense added. For the husband, this is the offering of jealousy that does not please God; for the wife, it is the offering of remembrance, to make her recall what the husband suspects, and to have God adjudicate before Him.

Next, God describes in great detail how the priest should determine whether the woman has committed adultery outside of her marriage. The process described is essentially a heavenly lie detector. God's power would work upon this woman's body, revealing the truth of the matter.

Verse 16: "Then the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the LORD."

The woman is brought to the priest, indicating that this woman is willing to cooperate, to make the truth public, and to help her husband dispel the spirit of jealousy. The priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD — this is a very important recognition. The woman has already come before the tabernacle, and the tabernacle is God's dwelling place; that is to say, she stands before God. When we bring before God the matters we cannot handle and ask God to reveal the truth, every person involved should clearly understand that they are standing before God. And God cannot be mocked — one cannot harbor wishful thinking, but must truly and honestly face God.

Verse 17: "The priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water."

The holy water should refer to the water in the bronze laver. When the priest was about to enter the holy place to minister, he had to first wash his hands and feet at the bronze laver to remove the impurities on his body before he could enter the holy place to serve God. And the bronze of the laver came from the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle. Therefore, the water of the laver symbolizes illumination and cleansing. The priest was also to take some dust from the floor of the tabernacle and put the water and dust together in an earthen vessel.

The Bible tells us that man was created from the dust of the ground and is to become a vessel to contain God; therefore this earthen vessel represents man. Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:20, "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor." (NKJV) Paul likened the saints in the church to vessels of gold, silver, wood, and clay — vessels for honor and vessels for dishonor. Paul also uses the earthen vessel as a type of the created person; the earthen vessel is to be filled with holy water, and this holy water can bring illumination and cleansing.

Into the earthen vessel there must also be added the dust from the ground. This dust from the ground typifies man's natural disposition and private desires; this also reveals that every person is in fact mixed. The Israelites were God's chosen people of the Old Testament — they had God's word, which could bring illumination and cleansing; but on the other hand, they were still full of natural tendencies and private desires. This earthen vessel was to hold the basic elements for making the bitter water: holy water and dust.

Verse 18: "The priest shall stand the woman before the LORD, uncover the woman's head, and put the offering for remembering in her hands, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And the priest shall have in his hand the bitter water that brings a curse."

The priest was to uncover the woman's head. Hair is naturally a woman's glory; uncovering her head means she stands in a state of shame, waiting for God to reveal the secrets of her heart. And the woman stands before the LORD. This verse once again reminds us of the solemnity of the matter. Since it is brought before God, God's verdict is the final answer.

The priest was to put the offering of remembrance — that is, the grain offering of jealousy — in her hand. Here, the Bible reverses the order, because for this woman it is the offering of remembrance, making her recall every event that occurred with nothing concealed. The offering of jealousy is said with respect to her husband, for the spirit of jealousy arose in her husband, and that is why she came to offer the jealousy offering and to ask God to reveal the hidden truth. And now all the actions center on this woman, so the text first says it is the offering of remembrance — and this offering of remembrance is precisely her husband's offering of jealousy. The answer to what the husband suspects lies with the woman.

Therefore the priest made the woman hold in her hand the one-tenth ephah of barley flour, while the priest held in his hand the bitter water. In the steps that follow, the priest was to add a curse to this bitter water so that the bitter water would bring about a curse. Because of the gravity of this curse, the priest repeatedly stated and explained it, making sure the woman fully understood with no room for ambiguity.

Verse 19: "And the priest shall put her under oath and say to the woman, 'If no man has lain with you, and if you have not gone astray to uncleanness while under your husband's authority, be free from this bitter water that brings a curse.'"

The priest began to explain to the woman the content of the oath, first stating the positive case: if this woman had not done anything unclean behind her husband's back and had not been with a third party, then the curse brought by the bitter water would not come upon her. At the same time, this would prove her innocence, and

her husband would have to completely accept her without any objection or suspicion.

Verses 20–21: "But if you have gone astray while under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself and some man other than your husband has lain with you"— then the priest shall put the woman under the oath of the curse, and he shall say to the woman—"the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh rot and your belly swell;"

Then the priest stated to the woman the negative content of the oath: if this woman had indeed done something unclean behind her husband's back and had been with a third party, then the curse of the bitter water would come upon her. This curse would bring three kinds of calamity, manifesting the LORD's work: first, her thigh would rot; second, her belly would swell; third, she would become a curse among the people of Israel.

The Chinese Union Version translates it as the thigh wasting away and the belly swelling, which basically follows the Hebrew original. The English translations KJV and ASV are similar to the Chinese Union Version: "the Lord will make your thigh to rot, and your belly to swell." The NIV translation is different — not following the original text but using an extended meaning: "your womb miscarry and your abdomen swell," meaning that the child conceived through adultery would miscarry and the belly would swell.

In fact, the NIV translation has already begun interpreting the text, and it is an inaccurate interpretation. In the Bible, the life of a baby begins in the mother's womb; having a child conceived through adultery miscarry would not align with God's attributes of righteousness and love. Therefore I still prefer the translation that follows the original text — though it is not easy to understand, it at least gives interpreters space to contemplate the meaning of the passage.

I will attempt to interpret this passage according to what I understand: the thigh is the most powerful part of the human body; the thigh rotting or wasting away

signifies the person losing their natural strength. The belly is the seat of human emotions — we often describe loved ones as being in our hearts. And the belly swelling refers to natural human emotions developing abnormally and swelling without any restraint; this is a portrayal of the act of adultery.

Perhaps she had hidden the matter of adultery very well — the affair was highly secretive with no witnesses at all. But the curse brought by the bitter water would cause this woman's thigh to waste away and her belly to swell; these physical changes would be immediately visible to people, thus making her hidden adultery publicly exposed before everyone. This woman would then become a curse among the people of Israel, avoided by everyone — a most severe curse.

Verse 22: "'and may this water that causes the curse go into your stomach, and make your belly swell and your thigh rot.' Then the woman shall say, 'Amen, amen.'"

The priest clearly told the woman that she was about to drink this bitter water; if she had indeed had an affair and been with a third party, after drinking the bitter water her belly would swell and her thigh would waste away, and her adultery would be publicly revealed before everyone.

The woman understood the gravity of the curse, but in order to prove her innocence she was willing to drink the bitter water, and so she was to answer, "Amen, amen." The word "Amen" originally means "Yes, I am willing"; two "Amens" in a row further emphasize that she truly and willingly consents. Throughout this process, the priest repeatedly explained the gravity of the curse and gave the woman the opportunity to choose, publicly declaring that she was truly willing.

Verses 23–24: "Then the priest shall write these curses in a book, and he shall scrape them off into the bitter water. And he shall make the woman drink the

bitter water that brings a curse, and the water that brings the curse shall enter her to become bitter."

This woman personally expressed that she was wholeheartedly willing to bear the curse of the bitter water. After this, the priest was to write these curses down in words in a scroll. At that time, the writing would have been done with a pen dipped in ink onto the scroll; before the ink had dried, the priest was to immediately scrape the writing off into the bitter water, signifying that the curse had now entered the bitter water. When the woman drank the bitter water, the water would become bitter, and the curse would take effect upon her — if she had indeed been with a third party outside of her husband. The Chinese Union Version's translation is somewhat vague and might give the impression that she drinks the bitter water right at this point, but she actually has not yet. Rather, the priest throughout each step of the process repeatedly recounts the test of the bitter water and the curse it would bring, so that this woman clearly understands all the possible consequences.

Verse 25: "Then the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman's hand, shall wave the offering before the LORD, and bring it to the altar;"

From the beginning, the woman had been holding in her hand the offering of remembrance — or the offering of jealousy — which was the one-tenth ephah of barley flour. After the priest had prepared the bitter water, he was to take the jealousy offering from the woman's hand, wave this jealousy offering before God, and ask God to preside and reveal the truth of the matter.

Verse 26: "and the priest shall take a handful of the offering, as its memorial portion, burn it on the altar, and afterward make the woman drink the water."

After the priest had brought this matter before God, he was to take a handful from the jealousy offering and burn it on the altar. If brothers and sisters still remember,

this jealousy offering had no oil and no frankincense added, so taking a handful and burning it on the altar would not produce a pleasing aroma. This was not a sacrifice to satisfy God, but the priest's act of showing that this matter was now fully entrusted into God's hands, for God Himself to decide. At this very moment, the priest was to hand the earthen vessel to the woman, and the woman was to drink the bitter water bearing the curse — before God, simultaneously with the offering of the jealousy offering, she was to drink the bitter water.

Verse 27: "When he has made her drink the water, then it shall be, if she has defiled herself and behaved unfaithfully toward her husband, that the water that brings a curse will enter her and become bitter, and her belly will swell, her thigh will rot, and the woman will become a curse among her people."

If this woman had been defiled and had sinned against her husband, the bitter water bearing the curse, upon entering her belly, would become bitter; her belly would swell and her thigh would waste away. The Bible does not specify how long it would take for the curse to manifest; personally, I believe it would happen immediately.

Because after such solemn handling by the priest, God was to manifest His work — God was to personally intervene, God was to personally reveal the hidden truth — therefore it should not take long before her husband would see the physical changes in her. If this woman's belly swelled and her thigh wasted away, it would indicate that she had committed adultery with a third party, and she would become a curse among the people of Israel.

Verse 28: "But if the woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she shall be free and may conceive children."

If this woman was innocent and had not been defiled, the bitter water bearing the curse would have absolutely no effect on her. Not only would she suffer no harm,

but her husband would have to receive her anew — with no further suspicion or jealousy — reconciling with her completely as before. Moreover, God would bless this woman, granting her the blessing of bearing and nursing children; she would conceive and bear offspring for her husband.

Under ordinary circumstances, when a husband suspects his wife of adultery but has no direct evidence, it is already a cup of bitter water for the wife — a cup of bitter water with no end in sight. Such suspicion would also destroy the previously peaceful family life.

God established the jealousy offering for the Israelites through Moses, and at that time it did indeed provide a very good way out for these women who suffered unjust accusations. If she was truly innocent, she would pass through this heavenly lie detector, and her husband would have to completely let go of his jealousy and suspicion — because God had already rendered judgment, and this was the conclusion, beyond dispute. In that era, it was indeed a good method for restoring family harmony.

For modern Christians, we must also learn to bring before God the matters we are uncertain about and cannot adjudicate ourselves, and ask God to reveal the truth. Once God has revealed it through the priest's hand, we must fully accept it and lay down our own opinions. Acknowledging that it is our own jealousy that has destroyed the family's harmony, and being willing to completely let go of ourselves — only then can we enjoy peace and joy before God.

Let us pray together: Lord, thank You for placing this passage of Scripture before us. Though we do not fully understand the deep meaning hidden within it, the operation of this heavenly lie detector helps us recognize that we should bring before God the matters we cannot decide ourselves, and acknowledge that we do not know the full picture of the situation — very likely it is our own jealousy or suspicious character that is at work.

When we bring matters before God and ask God to reveal the truth, God may do so through a variety of different ways, and we must fully accept God's verdict. Help us, Lord, to bring matters before God, and to be willing to submit to the will God

has revealed in the matter — only then can we enjoy the peace and joy that come from God. May God bless our daily lives, and bless every member of our family, that all may live in a harmonious and peaceful setting. We pray in the holy name of the Lord Jesus Christ.