

Immerse Day 46 :: April 5

On the way to Easter dinner at my parents' house, I asked my family what they thought about the emphasis on cleanliness in these pages. "Um....Mom, we are still in the middle of a global pandemic. Isn't that a pretty clear connection?".

Yes, I suppose it is. The Israelites didn't have the benefit of microscopes or any knowledge of viruses and bacteria. They didn't understand the science behind viral or bacterial transmission; they couldn't. Perhaps God gave them these laws to interrupt sickness. Perhaps by asking the Israelites to bathe and wash often, he was protecting them from disease. I have to smile at his order to sacrifice a pair of doves or two young pigeons as well. While God clearly communicates the necessity of hygiene, he also normalizes the discharge of bodily fluids, it seems. How generous. He doesn't just demand obedience. He also seems to assure his people that they are free from condemnation by normalizing the need for a bath. In my Bible, I read that the purpose of a burnt offering was a 'voluntary act of worship', an offering that atoned for 'unintentional sin' and an 'expression of devotion, commitment, and complete surrender to God.' I read, again in my Bible, that a sin offering reinforces the idea of 'unintentional sin' and results in 'cleansing from defilement'. I'm wondering if it's a bit like God telling the Israelites that it's normal for their bodies to discharge; however, it also communicates that any discharge of bodily fluid requires a bath. In that way, God normalizes bodily processes and creates a system for the Israelites to stay healthy. He commands hygiene for their benefit and asks them to trust him, because he knows they can't yet understand the importance of bathing to prevent the spread of disease. They have no idea how disease is transmitted, so God uses a law to protect them.

Sometimes when my sons walk in the door after a long basketball or soccer practice, they are ravenously hungry. All they can think about is food. Occasionally, I have to remind them to wash their hands or demand that they shower before sitting down to dinner. But, it usually doesn't take much. They know about viruses and bacteria. They have studied cell walls and dissected frogs; they know I'm right. I imagine that more than one Israelite parent appreciated that God laid down the law. Those parents didn't know about microscopes or microbes, but they also didn't have to argue with their kids to wash up before dinner. They just had to remind them that washing up was God's way. Again, we serve a God who is both loving and pragmatic. They may not have understood the reasons for bathing, but they knew to be obedient to God.

As I think about this, I wonder if that might be the case for me too. There are passages in the Bible that don't make sense to me. I don't understand, for example, why Paul writes in 1Timothy2:11 "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent". I must admit that verse evokes a pretty strong reaction in me. I wrestled with that one for a long time before coming to peace with it. I'm certain there are others too.

If I temper my initial response to verses like the one in 1Timothy and ask myself why a generous God with a history of giving orders for his children's benefit would require silence, I have to wonder if God's commands will make more sense once science or ethics has more fully developed. Perhaps the passage of time now renders women capable of teaching and having authority in 2021 while women, who had been oppressed for so many generations, may not have been ready to teach or steward authority in Paul's lifetime. I'm not sure, and that's really an entry for another day.

The point is that God's law protected the Israelites from disease. His laws were created for his children's protection, and remain in place now as reminders that we can have confidence in his word. We can follow him, even when the rules don't make sense because our God is practical and seeks to protect us from that which we do not yet understand.