

Numbers 5:11-15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-5/numbers-511-15/>

The next subject, which is called “the law of jealousy” in Numbers 5:29, is discussed in verses 11-31. It concerns marital infidelity that was suspected but not verified. The marriage relationship, the most basic of all between humans, and the building block for a successful self-governing society, was a reflection of one’s relationship to the LORD. To be unfaithful in marriage was to be unfaithful to one’s LORD.

The first part of this section, verses 11-15, introduces the law concerning suspected but unverified marital infidelity on the part of the wife.

To introduce the next section, *the Lord spoke to Moses* (v. 11). Again, what was discussed in this section began with the LORD and was not something originating from Moses. Once more, the LORD told Moses to *speak to the sons of Israel and say to them* (v. 12).

The scenario discussed here was that *if any man’s wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him*. The specifics were

- *A man has intercourse with her, outside of marriage* (v. 13).
- *It is hidden from the eyes of her husband, so is therefore unverified.*
- *She is undetected, although she has defiled herself.* The husband suspects, but has no evidence.
- *There is no witness against her.*
- *She has not been caught in the act.*

In other words, the situation in view here is that a wife had sexual relations with a man that was not her husband and they were able to keep it a secret. In contrast to the previous two cases, which were outward and easily observed, this situation involved actions done in secret and not observed.

In spite of its being hidden from view, the scenario was a serious one. It was a violation of the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14), making it not only a violation of one’s marital vows but also an offense against the LORD. Having stable families is essential if the society is to be self-governing and if each generation is to be taught to love others as themselves. So the fidelity of marriage is a high priority.

The law applied to a husband who suspected his wife of adultery. It stated that *if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself* (v. 14). Notice that it is the *spirit of jealousy*. It was not the “spirit of envy.” Jealousy in this case is a desire to protect that which is your responsibility to steward, that which is rightfully yours. Envy is a desire for that which is not rightfully yours. The husband was to act whether or not he had

proof of his wife's guilt. In doing this, the relationship would be healed, whether or not the problem was real or the problem was suspicion.

God is jealous for His people in this same sense. He desires to protect and walk in intimate fellowship with them, for their own benefit (Numbers 25:13; Deuteronomy 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; Joshua 24:19). The Old Testament pictures God as the husband of Israel. The New Testament pictures Jesus as the husband of the church (Ephesians 5:31-32).

To discover whether adultery had taken place, the jealous husband was to *bring his wife to the priest* (v. 15). Her guilt or innocence was not going to be determined by the husband's emotions. He also was to *bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal*. This offering was special in that the grain used here was "barley." Usually, the grain offering was comprised of wheat. Barley was less expensive than wheat and was the grain eaten by poor people and cattle (Judges 7:13; 2 Kings 4:42). It might represent the lowly state of the reason for the accusation against the wife.

The husband was instructed not to *pour oil on it nor put frankincense on it*. That is, he was not supposed to do that which only a priest was authorized to do. The reason was that it was *a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of memorial, a reminder of iniquity*. The phrase *grain offering of jealousy* is only used here, so we are not given context to know its exact meaning. This offering was necessary because adultery broke the fellowship of the fundamental building block for a self-governing society. God's commands were for the good of each person, as well as for the entire nation. Sinning against another was also a sin against the LORD, and an offering was required for it.

The phrase *reminder of iniquity* literally reads "remembrance of iniquity." The idea here was that the offering was given to bring to the LORD's remembrance the iniquity in order for Him to judge the iniquity.

Biblical Text

¹¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, ¹³ and a man has intercourse with her and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband and she is undetected, although she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act, ¹⁴ if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has defiled herself, or if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵ the man shall then bring his wife to the priest, and shall bring *as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall not pour oil on it nor put frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of memorial, a reminder of iniquity.*