

Numbers 5:23-28

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-5/numbers-523-28/>

Numbers 5:23-28 contain additional activities that needed to happen prior to the woman drinking the water.

After the woman suspected of adultery had accepted the curse uttered by the priest (in verses 21-22), the priest was then instructed to do the following:

- *Write these curses on a scroll* (v. 23). The “scroll” would contain the curses that would apply to any woman who was guilty.
 - It could be that Jesus had this provision in mind when He wrote in the dust after the adulterous woman was brought to Him, writing the curses in the dust (John 8:6). Just as dust would forget these curses, so would Jesus’ forgiveness wipe away the sins of the woman.
- *Wash them off into the water of bitterness.* The picture is that the ink used to write the curses on the scroll are washed off and placed into a jar with the “water of bitterness.”
- *Make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings a curse, so that the water which brings a curse will go into her and cause bitterness* (v. 24). Not only did the woman hear the curses, she had to take them internally. Symbolically, the curses would become a part of her body. If she was guilty, the “curses” would activate trauma in her body.

When Moses shattered the tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were written, and ground the golden calf into dust, mixed it with water then made the people drink it, it might picture this ceremony of jealousy, where God creates consequences for unfaithfulness, but also restores fellowship between Himself as the husband of Israel, and Israel as His wife (Exodus 32:20).

The next part of the process was the giving of an offering to the LORD. Here, *the priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman’s hand, and he shall wave the grain offering before the Lord and bring it to the altar* (v. 25). In addition to waving the offering, *the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial offering and offer it up in smoke on the altar* (v. 26).

Then, the priest made *the woman drink the water*. This states that the grain offering was to be offered first, and then the woman was to drink the water.

Verses 27-28 repeat what was said earlier in verse 23. It was stated again that when the priest *made her drink the water, then it shall come about, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, that the water which brings a curse will go into her and cause bitterness, and her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away, and the woman will*

become a curse among her people (v. 27). If the woman was guilty, the water would cause a severe physical reaction

Again, the LORD will cause the water to interact with her body in such a way as to make it obvious that she was guilty of adultery. Note also that capital punishment was not involved in this situation as it was when both adulterous partners were known (Leviticus 20:10).

The other outcome was described again in verse 28. Here, it was described when *the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will then be free and conceive children* (v. 28). If the woman was innocent, there would be no consequences from drinking the water.

This ceremony reflects several principles found throughout scripture. One not previously mentioned is to bring difficulties before the Lord. In this instance, God is taking on the responsibility of suspicion. By submitting to this ceremony, the husband is releasing any right he might claim to judge his wife. He should be releasing bitterness, and allowing God to deal with the situation. This principle is throughout scripture, as in the New Testament verse that tells believers that we should be:

“...casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you”
(1 Peter 5:7)

It is also a way to exercise the core principle of the Lord’s prayer, which is to forgive others as God forgives us ([see commentary on Matthew 6:9-15](#)). In making this provision, God is providing a way for a struggling couple to allow God’s forgiveness to heal their marriage.

However, forgiving others means handing judgement from our hands into God’s. And God makes clear that He will judge sin. God has judged all the sins of the world on the cross of Christ, making it possible for anyone who receives the free gift of God’s grace to become a child of God (John 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9). However, even though Jesus’ death on the cross heals our separation from God, sin still has consequences. We still die, because of sin. And anyone who sins will experience the consequence of sin. The consequence of sin always includes some form of death (Romans 6:23). Death is separation. In this case, if the woman is guilty, she will be separated from her desire to bear children. However, the couple is to leave that in the hands of God. The husband is to release his judgement to God, and the woman is to trust that God will be just to her.

Biblical Text

²³ **‘The priest shall then write these curses on a scroll, and he shall wash them off into the water of bitterness. ²⁴ Then he shall make the woman drink the water of bitterness that brings a curse, so that the water which brings a curse will go into her and *cause* bitterness. ²⁵ The priest shall take the grain offering of jealousy from the woman’s hand, and he shall wave the grain offering before the Lord and bring it to the altar; ²⁶ and the priest shall take a handful of the grain offering as its memorial offering and offer *it up* in smoke on the**

altar, and afterward he shall make the woman drink the water. ²⁷ When he has made her drink the water, then it shall come about, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, that the water which brings a curse will go into her and *cause* bitterness, and her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away, and the woman will become a curse among her people. ²⁸ But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will then be free and conceive children.