

**MESSAGE 16**  
**UNCLEANNES FROM *TSARAATH* IN PEOPLE**  
**OR IN CLOTH AND LEATHER**  
**Leviticus 13:1-59**

**Introduction**

A third type of uncleanness was from a type of disease. In people it began with a spot on the skin that spread and eventually became an open sore. The Hebrews were familiar with a malady that affected cloth and leather that had a similar appearance to the human disease. They were also aware of a malady that affected stone houses that had a similar appearance. They called all three conditions by the same name, which was *tsaraath*. Jehovah chose the three conditions called by that name as another symbol of sin, to remind His people of their responsibility to avoid sin at all times and to work to remove the effects of sin from their lives.

Few Biblical subjects have been more clouded with misinterpretation and harmful, superstitious, unscholarly speculation than this one. The misunderstanding originated in the fact that the conditions described in Leviticus 13 are not known today, and translators did not know how to translate the name into other languages. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the first or second century B.C., the translators rendered the Hebrew name for the disease with the Greek word "*lepra*." Whereas the Hebrew name seems to have meant "an humbling malady," the Greek name means "scaly." The Greek word *lepra*, unlike the Hebrew word *tsaraath*, was general in meaning and did not apply to any certain malady. Centuries later, when Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he transliterated the Greek name instead of using a Latin word. Later when the Bible began to be translated into English, English translators followed Jerome's practice and transliterated the Greek word into their versions. Thus, in English translations the disease came to be called "leprosy." Modern leprosy is not the same disease that the Hebrews called *tsaraath*, so English readers began with a misconception of the disease described in this chapter. Then one layer of misinformation was laid upon another until people came to believe that the disease described in this chapter was one of the most terrible that ever existed. They came to have a superstitious fear of the word "leprosy." That fear has made it exceedingly difficult for Bible readers to arrive at a proper interpretation of this chapter. Only in recent years are people beginning to overcome that fear, allowing us to make a more reasoned interpretation of this chapter.

In seeking to unravel the confusion that has existed with regard to this disease, it is important to examine the manner in which the disease is described in Scripture. First, the disease could affect cloth or leather (Lev. 13:47-58) and stone houses (Lev. 14:34-53), as well as people (Lev. 13:2-46). Second, the disease in humans was characterized by six symptoms: (1) a swollen, scabby, or itchy spot or spots on the skin (Lev. 13:2,6-8,10,19,30,31,35-36,43), (2) loss of color of the skin in the affected spot or spots (Ex. 4:6; Lev. 13:3,10,19,24,42-43; Num. 12:10; 2 Kings 5:27), (3) lightening of the color of the hair in the affected spot or spots (Lev. 13:3,10,20,25,30); (4) a tendency for the spot or spots to spread in the skin (Lev. 13:6-8,22,27,35-36); (5) penetration of the spot or spots into the flesh below the skin (Lev. 13:20,21,25,30) and (6) in advanced stages, an open, raw sore or sores in the spot or spots (Lev. 13:10-11,14-15). Third, nowhere in the Scripture is the malady called loathsome, foul, repugnant, horrible, stinking, or deadly. Num. 12:11-12 has been wrongly used to support the position that leprosy was a repulsive and deadly disease. Those verses contain the plea of Aaron in behalf of Miriam after she was stricken with the malady for defying Moses. Aaron said, "Alas, my lord, I beseech you, do not lay the sin on us, by which we have done foolishly, and by which we have sinned. Do not let her be like a dead one, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb." Aaron's description is horrible and frightening, but Aaron was describing the effects of sin on a person's life, not the symptoms of the disease. Aaron's description has nothing to do with the symptoms of the

disease that is described in this chapter. Fourth, the disease is not described in Scripture as being incurable. In fact, quite to the contrary, Leviticus 14:1-32, which describes cleansing from the disease, is built on the assumption that the disease was curable and that a cure could to be expected (see comments on those verses in MESSAGE 17). The disease described in this chapter, according to these facts, was definitely not the unspeakably abominable affliction that it has so often been described as being.

Several successive steps led to the false ideas about the Biblical disease that were prevalent for so many years. The first step was misinterpreting the Scriptures to contend that the disease described in this chapter was proof that the person had sinned a terrible sin. That view is just one form of the idea that affliction is always proof of sin, a position that should have been dispelled for all time by the book of Job. The disease is not described as a result of sin or proof of sin, but as a symbol for sin. Then, Scripture was further misinterpreted to contend that the disease was a special malady visited on people only by a blow from the Lord. The striking of Moses (Ex. 4:6), Miriam (Num. 12:10), Gehazzi (II Kings 5:27), and Uzziah (II King 15:5; II Chr. 26:20-23) with the disease has been used as evidence that the disease was contracted only as a punishment from Jehovah God. However, just because some people were struck with this disease as punishment does not mean that every case of the disease was a visitation of God's wrath. Actually, Moses' contracting the disease supports that view. When Moses was not stricken with the disease, God did not put it on him as a punishment but as a sign of His power to persuade Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free (Ex. 4:6-8).

The second step in the development of false ideas about the disease described in this chapter came from an effort in relatively modern times to identify the Biblical disease with the disease that today is called by the name "leprosy." The name "leprosy" did not come from a disease known by that name, but by transliterating a Greek word into English. So after the Greek word was brought over into English, people sought to know what disease it represented. In trying to identify the disease, people began by observing diseases that begin as a spot on the skin and then spread through the body. Since it was already believed that the Biblical disease was an awful visitation from sin, they sought for the most terrible disease known that could by any stretch of the imagination could fit the Biblical description. Some connected the disease with elephantiasis, which certainly is a fearful disease because of the way it distorts the appearance of the afflicted person. It is caused by a type of worm that cuts off the flow of blood and lymph from the extremities of the body. Its effects are first seen as a spot on the skin. As it progresses, the legs, arms, or head become filled with fluid and are distorted all out of shape. Then, the skin often breaks and bleeds. If it affects the legs, they become so puffy that the skin of the legs expands over the feet until the legs of the person look like the legs of an elephant. Thus, the disease was named "elephantiasis." However, no connection exists between elephantiasis and the disease described in this chapter. At no time is elephantiasis characterized by whiteness or clearness of the skin and lightening of the hair in the affected part. And, nowhere in the Scripture are the severe symptoms of elephantiasis described in connection with the Biblical disease.

In the end, the Biblical disease came to be connected with the disease that is called "leprosy" today, but that name came from applying the transliterated Greek term *lepra* to the disease, not because it already had that name. The disease that is known as leprosy in modern times has two forms: lepromatous (skin) and tuberculoid (nerve). The two forms are caused by slightly different bacilli and have slightly different symptoms in that the tubercular variety results in greater nerve damage. Both forms of the disease begin with reddish or brownish patches on the skin. As the disease progresses, the bacilli spread along the nerves to affect especially the ear lobes, the eyes, the chin, the elbow, the knees, or the mucous membrane of the nose, throat, and hands. Bones become porous and fragile, and the nerves become insensitive. The afflicted person damages the fragile bones because he or she has no feeling in the affected parts of the body. The bones chip away and are absorbed by the body, so that the fingers and toes grow shorter. The modern disease called "leprosy" is a serious disease, but it has no more connection with the disease described in this chapter than elephantiasis has. Modern leprosy is not characterized by loss of color in the skin or by lightening of the hair, and nowhere in Scripture are the severe

later stages of modern leprosy mentioned in connection with the Biblical disease. Modern leprosy is simply not the same disease as the disease described in this chapter.

The third step in the development of false ideas concerning the disease described in this chapter came as Christian preachers and teachers, desiring to show the awfulness of sin, dramatized and elaborated the symptoms of modern leprosy and used them as symbols and pictures of the results of sin. They sometimes confused and combined the symptoms of modern leprosy with elephantiasis. Then they exaggerated the symptoms beyond reality and described them in the most vivid of language. Thus, leprosy came to be thought of as a much more horrible disease than it really is, and all of those horrible ideas were then applied to the Biblical disease. Actually, the concept of the disease in the minds of most Christians bore no resemblance to the disease described in the Scripture.

The final step in this ugly process was turning uncleanness from the Biblical disease into a stigma placed on modern leprosy. People with modern leprosy were isolated in colonies and ostracized from society. This quarantining of people with modern leprosy was unnecessary, because leprosy is only slightly contagious. When leper colonies were maintained around the world, people served in them as doctors, nurses, and orderlies for years without ever contracting the disease, simply because they observed simple, easy-to-follow rules of hygiene. However, the person afflicted with the modern disease called “leprosy” became a despised and feared person, totally out of proportion to the real seriousness of the disease. The social ostracism that was placed on the disease was worse than the physical symptoms of the disease.

A young man named Sidney Maurice Levysen, became afflicted with modern leprosy in its lepromatic form and was confined in a leprosarium at Carville, Louisiana. He soon realized the injustice of fearing and ostracizing people with leprosy, and he began a campaign to educate the world in an effort to correct the false ideas that had grown up in connection with the disease of leprosy. He conducted his campaign through a newspaper named “The Sixty-six Star,” which he published and distributed from the hospital. Eventually the newspaper gained world-wide reading. He also conducted his campaign through a book he wrote with Lawrence G. Blochman, entitled Alone No Longer. The book was published in 1963 by Funk and Wagnalls Co., Inc., of New York City. Response came more quickly than expected. Two concrete accomplishments resulted. One was the changing of the name of modern leprosy to “Hansen’s Disease,” a name that was taken from the name of the man who pioneered modern research on the disease. Many resisted this change of name on the grounds that a disease should not be named for a man who worked toward its cure. The contention was that such a name seems to indicate that Doctor Hansen had the disease rather than that he worked toward its cure. Nonetheless, the name gained wide acceptance and is commonly used today.

The second result of Levysen’s efforts was an effort on the part of some to rename the disease described in Leviticus 13. This effort has not gained wide acceptance, though it still should happen. The effort to bring a foreign word into another language by transliteration is always a dangerous one, because the word so easily changes its meaning and its connotation in the process. Just such a change in meaning occurred with the Biblical disease as described above, and it opened the way for serious misunderstanding of the nature of the disease. However, an effort to coin another new English word meets with the same difficulties. No modern disease is known that fits the symptoms of the disease described in Leviticus 13; therefore, most modern English translations of the Bible continue to use the traditional rendering and transliterate the name from Greek through Latin as “leprosy.” Two exceptions to this practice are the Jerusalem Bible, which translates the name as “a malignant skin disease” and Holman Christian Standard Bible, which translates it as “skin disease.” These renderings are not helpful, because they tend to indicate that the disease of Leviticus 13 can be any skin disease. That implication is certainly false, because the chapter describes specific, identifiable symptoms for the disease. Therefore, this writing will use the transliteration of the Hebrew name for the disease. That

practice has its difficulties, but it at least breaks free from the mistaken ideas connected with names used in the past. Therefore, please try to become accustomed to the name "*tsaraath*."

The disease described in Leviticus 13 was not a dreadful, repulsive disease that doomed a person to sure and painful death. It was rather a malady that was not exceedingly injurious to the person's health and from which he could have reasonable hope of recovery. Sidney Levysen, who did so much to inform the world of facts about modern leprosy, was not as well informed concerning the Biblical disease. He followed certain interpreters who contended that the Hebrew term applied to a whole family of skin diseases. One careful reading of Leviticus 13 will show that view is not correct. The symptoms of the disease are clearly defined and always consistent. Leviticus 13 also gives instructions concerning how to distinguish this disease from other similar diseases (see comments on Lev. 13:4-6,12-13,28,34,38-39 below). As described in this chapter, the disease was one certain malady that began on the skin and spread outward and inward in the person's flesh. Its most serious stage was characterized by a raw sore in the stricken spot or spots. However, the Hebrew name for the disease was also used to designate a certain type of growth that attached itself to cloth and leather and another type of growth that attached itself to stone houses. The three maladies could not have been the same disease, because human infections do not spread to cloth and stone, and germs that thrive in living flesh do not live in inanimate matter. The symptoms of the three maladies were similar in appearance. Therefore, the Hebrews considered them to be one malady and called all three conditions by the same name.

Much misunderstanding has also been involved in the effort to explain the purpose of the Leviticus regulations concerning this disease. Most often, the regulations have been explained as health laws. It has been said that their purposes was to identify an especially contagious disease and isolate the people who were afflicted with it to prevent the disease from spreading. However, no mention is made in the Bible of isolating people with other diseases that were known to be contagious; and the Bible places no emphasis on any contagious qualities of this disease. Furthermore, in the text no attention at all is given to trying to cure the disease. The concern of the text is with cleansing the person after he or she had been cured. The text does not reveal concern with stopping a spreading health menace but concern with using the disease as a symbol.

The proper understanding of the purpose for uncleanness from *tsaraath* was to use them as teaching symbols. Like the other types of uncleanness, the three conditions called "*tsaraath*" were chosen by Jehovah, not because of their inherent awfulness, but in order to use them as symbols. They were made to be symbols of sin. Wherever the diseases occurred, they were to be reminders to the Israelites that they were obligated to avoid contact with sin in every way possible.

A man afflicted with *tsaraath* was put to considerable inconvenience, but he was not in as severe a physical condition as has been supposed. It might be questioned as to whether it was fair to put a man or woman to such inconvenience, simply so that he or she could become a symbol useful to Jehovah. The answer depends on how much significance is attached to the surrender of a person's life to Jehovah to be used in any way He sees fit. Accepting the covenant meant that an Israelite surrendered his or her life to Jehovah in just that fashion. If the person really meant to make that kind of a surrender, he knew that the highest achievement of his life was to do the will of Jehovah, even if it meant giving up his wealth, his friends, or his life. From that point of view, it was an honor for a person to be used by Jehovah to warn others of the dangers of sin. Being used in that manner by Jehovah was as worthy a purpose for a person's life as any other calling that Jehovah could give him. If Jehovah chose to set him apart from other people as a symbol of sin, it was as meaningful a place of service as if Jehovah set him apart from other people as a priest.

This MESSAGE can be outlined as follows:

	<u>Pages</u>
3. Uncleaness from <i>tsaraath</i> on people or in cloth and leather (13:1-59) . . . . .	5-14
Introductory note (13:1). . . . .	5
a. <i>Tsaraath</i> in people (13:2-46). . . . .	5-11
(1) Recognition by a priest of <i>tsaraath</i> in people (13:2-44). . . . .	5-11
(a) In early stages (13:2-8). . . . .	5-7
(b) In an advanced stage (13:9-11). . . . .	7
(c) In a whiteness covering the whole body (13:12-17). . . . .	7-8
(d) In the scar of a boil (13:18-23). . . . .	8
(e) In the scar of a burn (13:24-28). . . . .	8-9
(f) In hair or beard (13:29-37). . . . .	9-10
(g) In clear skin (13:38-39). . . . .	10
(h) In a bald head (13:40-44). . . . .	10-11
(2) Conduct of a person stricken with <i>tsaraath</i> (13:45-46). . . . .	11
b. <i>Tsaraath</i> in cloth or leather (13:47-58). . . . .	11-13
(1) Recognition by a priest of <i>tsaraath</i> in cloth or leather (13:47-52). . . . .	11-12
(2) Handling of cloth or leather stricken with <i>tsaraath</i> (13:53-58). . . . .	12-13
Summary note (13:59) . . . . .	13-14

### Interpretation

#### CHAPTER 13

##### Introductory note (13:1)

##### Verse 1. **And Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,**

A new MESSAGE is introduced in this verse. It was spoken to Moses and Aaron, probably because Aaron was still present in The Tabernacle for the seven days of fillings (see comments on Lev. 8:33-36 in MESSAGE 10 and in Introduction to MESSAGE 14).

##### a. *Tsaraath* in people (13:2-46)

##### (1) Recognition by a priest of *tsaraath* in people (13:2-44)

##### (a) In its early stages (13:2-8)

##### Verse 2. **When a man has on the skin of his body a swelling or an eruption or a bright spot and it is on the skin of his body like a**

**striking of *tsaraath*, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests.**

When a man has in the skin of his flesh a swelling or an eruption or a shiny spot and it is on the skin of his body. The word “man” should be taken in its generic sense, to include men and women. Symptoms that indicated that a person might be afflicted with *tsaraath* are listed here. The word translated “swelling” is not used often in the Scripture, but it is built on a root meaning “to lift up.” It seems to refer to a swollen spot in the skin. The word translated “eruption” has generally been understood to describe a sore that causes a scab, though it may have been a sore that oozed. The word translated “shiny spot” is based on a root meaning “bright.” It seems to refer to a shiny spot caused by the skin’s losing its pigment and becoming light in color. The brown hue of the Hebrews’ skin would make such a spot obvious. When one of those signs appeared on the skin, a possibility existed that the beginning of ~~the~~ *tsaraath* might have occurred.

like a striking of *tsaraath*. These words mean that the spot resembled *tsaraath*. The word translated “striking” is a noun that means “a strike” or “a blow.” It has the same meaning as the English

expression “stricken with a disease.” The meaning is that the skin condition on the person looked like he might be stricken with *tsaraath*.

then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or unto one of his sons the priests. When a person was suspected of having *tsaraath*, he was to be taken to the priests, who were expected to be qualified to determine if the condition really was *tsaraath*. Either the high priest or an ordinary priest could make the determination. The reason for taking him to a priest instead of to a doctor was not the shortage of doctors in the wilderness, though we know nothing about whether any Israelites at that time were skilled in medicine or not. The Israelites had other surprising skills, like those required for building The Tabernacle (Ex. 35:30-36:3). Other people with special training may have been present as well, out of 600,00 men over 20 years of age who left Egypt (probably at total of about 2,000,000 when women and children are considered). Neither was he to be taken to the priests because of a lack of respect for doctors, as some have suggested. The reason was that medical questions were not involved. A religious ceremony was involved. It is best, therefore, not to refer to the examination of the priest as a diagnosis. The priest was not expected to diagnose the disease for treatment but to recognize the malady for ceremonial purposes.

**Verse 3. And the priest shall examine the stricken spot on the skin of his body, and if the hair of the stricken spot has turned white and the appearance of the stricken spot is deeper than the skin of his body, it is a striking of *tsaraath*. When the priest has examined him, he shall declare him unclean.**

The priest was to look for two symptoms in determining if the spot was *tsaraath*. The first was that the hair growing out of the spot had turned white or lighter in color. The second was that the spot extended beneath the skin and the priest could see that the flesh below the skin was affected. This second symptom shows that *tsaraath* was more than a skin disease. When it penetrated below the skin, it was *tsaraath*. Thus, the translation “skin disease” for the name of this disease is deceiving. If the two signs listed were present, the disease was *tsaraath*.

The man was to be declared unclean. A declaration that he was unclean meant that he was to be a symbol of moral evil. It had nothing to do with his moral character or the treatment of his disease. He had been chosen as teaching symbol.

**Verse 4. And if the spot is white in the skin of his body and its appearance is not deeper than the skin and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall shut up the stricken person for seven days.**

If the spot had turned white, that is, had lost its pigment and become light in color but the other two signs of *tsaraath* were not present, then the person was to be “shut up” for seven days to give the condition time to develop so that a sure determination could be made at the end of that time. Some have assumed that “shut up” means that the person was to be kept outside the camp during this period. The expression likely means that he was to be kept from his normal duties or in a room to himself. This conclusion is confirmed in verses 9-11 below, where it is stated that a person with an advanced stage of *tsaraath* was not to be “shut up” whereas he definitely was to be put out of the camp (see comments on Lev. 13:9-11 and on Lev. 13:45-46 below). Contagion was not in their minds. The person was simply kept for observation until a clear determination could be made as to whether he had *tsaraath* or not.

**Verse 5. And the priest shall examine him on the seventh day, and if the stricken spot has stood steady in his eyes [and] the stricken spot has not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up a second seven days.**

At the end of seven days, he was to be examined by the priest again. If the diseased spot had not changed and had not spread, he was to be kept for observation for another seven days. The reason for not waiting a full two week period to begin with was that the disease might have spread and he could be declared unclean at the end of the first week.

**Verse 6. And the priest shall examine him on the second seventh day, and if the stricken spot is dim and the stricken spot has not spread**

**in the skin, then the priest shall declare him clean. It is an eruption, and he shall wash his clothes and be clean.**

At the end of the second seven day period, if the spot was not as prominent because some of the pigment had returned and if the spot had not spread, the disease was not *tsaraath*. The man was to be pronounced clean. This statement clearly shows that the spreading of the disease was a third sign that *tsaraath* was present, to be added to the two symptoms identified in verse 3. Since this man did not have *tsaraath*, he had never been unclean. However, since he had been under suspicion of being unclean, he was to wash his clothes to remove any suspicion. No one was to doubt his cleanness.

Verses 7-8. **7 And if the eruption begins to spread in the skin after he has shown himself to the priest to declare him clean, he shall appear a second [time] before the priest.**

**8 And the priest shall make an examination, and if the eruption has spread in the skin, then the priest shall declare him unclean. It is *tsaraath*.**

If, after being pronounced clean, the disease should spread in the skin, the man was to be taken back to the priest. If the priest saw that it had indeed spread, he was to know that the malady was *tsaraath*. The man was to be pronounced unclean. The first decision of the priest did not finally settle the matter if the disease further developed and did indeed become *tsaraath*.

(b) In an advanced stage (13:9-11)

Verses 9-11. **9. When a striking of *tsaraath* comes on a man, he shall be brought to the priest,**

**10. And the priest shall make an examination, and if this [shows] a white swelling in the skin and the hair has turned white and a raw spot [is] in the living flesh in the swelling,**

**11. It is a persistent *tsaraath* in the skin of his body, and the priest shall declare him unclean. He must not shut him up, because he is unclean.**

A more advanced case of *tsaraath* is discussed here. Three signs of advanced *tsaraath* are given: a white swollen spot in the skin, white hair in the swollen spot, and an open, raw sore in the swollen spot. Those symptoms are unpleasant but far from the awfulness that has so often been described for the disease in advanced stages.

If those symptoms were present, the person definitely had *tsaraath*. *Tsaraath* in an advanced stage could be recognized immediately. No waiting period for observation was needed. The statement, "He must not shut him up, because he [is] unclean" does not mean that he was not to be isolated from other people, because verses 45-46 below say that a person with *tsaraath* was to live outside the camp and was to call out "Unclean, unclean" when other people drew near (see comments on those verse below). They mean it was not necessary for him to be confined for observation because he obviously had *tsaraath*. The statement that he was not to be "shut up," shows that "shutting up" did not mean putting him outside the camp. Putting him outside the camp was exactly what was required. The statement means that, without the necessity of waiting, the person in whom the disease was spreading was to be declared immediately to be unclean.

(c) In a whiteness covering the whole body (13:12-17)

Verses 12-13. **12 And if the *tsaraath* breaking out breaks out in the skin and the *tsaraath* covers all the skin of the stricken person from head to foot according to all the appearance of him by the priest,**

**13 Then the priest shall make an examination, and if the *tsaraath* has covered all his body, he shall declare him clean of the disease. It has all turned white. He is clean.**

If the person brought to the priest had a condition in which his skin had turned white all over his body, he did not have *tsaraath*. That condition was a symptom of a different disease. It is said that a disease exists in the Middle East that causes a white scaliness of the skin all over, which soon peels off and leaves fresh, whole skin. That

disease is not *tsaraath*. Obviously *tsaraath* did not affect the skin all over the whole body.

Verses 14-15. **14 And in a day of seeing on him raw flesh, he is unclean,**

**15 And the priest shall examine the raw flesh and declare him unclean. Raw flesh is unclean. It is *tsaraath*.**

If, however, one or more open, raw sores were on the person's body in addition to the whiteness that covered his whole body, it was a sign that the disease was *tsaraath*. A priest was to declare the person so affected to be unclean.

Verses 16-17. **16 If, however, the raw flesh changes and has turned to white, then he shall come to the priest,**

**17 And the priest shall examine him. and if the striking has turned to white, then the priest shall declare the stricken person clean. He [is] clean.**

On the other hand, if the raw sore should heal over and become white like the rest of the affected person's body, it was a sign that the sore was caused by something other than *tsaraath*. The determination that he had *tsaraath* was mistaken. He was to be declared clean. Evidently this man did not have to go through the cleansing process described in chapter 14. He had never really had leprosy or been unclean, though the priest had thought he was.

(d) In the scar of a boil (13:18-23)

Verses 18-23. **18 And a body in which in the skin was a boil, and it was healed**

**19 And in the place of the boil came a white swelling or a reddish white spot, then it shall be shown to the priest,**

**20 And the priest shall examine [it], and if its appearance [is] deeper than the skin and its hair has turned white, then the priest shall declare him unclean. It [is] the striking of *tsaraath*. It has broken out in the boil.**

Evidently the scar left by a boil was a common place for *tsaraath* to attack. A careful watch was to be kept on a scar left by a boil or a carbuncle. A suspicious sign of *tsaraath* in the scar of a boil was a swelling of pinkish color. Should that condition appear, the person was to be taken to a priest. If the priest should find that the spot appeared to penetrate below the skin and the hair growing in the spot had turned white, he was to declare the person unclean. Such a condition was an indication of *tsaraath*.

Verses 21-23. **21 And if the priest examines it and a white hair is not in it and it is not deeper than the skin and is dim, then the priest shall shut him up [for] seven days.**

**22 and if it spreads in the skin, the priest shall declare him unclean. It is a striking.**

**23 But if the spot stands steady and does not spread, then the priest shall declare him clean.**

If the priest examined the swollen spot that appeared in the scar of a boil and found that it did not penetrate deeper than the skin and that the hair in it was not white, the priest was to shut him up for seven days for observation. If, at the end of seven days, the swelling had spread, it was a sign that the malady was *tsaraath*; and the priest was to declare him unclean. However, if spot had not spread, it was a sign that the swelling was not *tsaraath* but an inflammation of the scar. The man was to be pronounced clean.

(e) In the scar of a burn (13:24-28)

Verses 24-28. **24 Or the body that has on its skin a scar of a burn and it is a bright spot, reddish-white or white,**

**25 Then the priest shall examine it and if the hair has turned white in the spot and its appearance is deeper than the skin, it [is] *tsaraath*. It has broken out in the burn.**

**26 But if the priest examines it and if the hair in it is not white and it is not deeper than the skin but is dim, the priest shall shut him up [for] seven days.**



**27 And the priest shall examine him in the seventh day, and if it is spreading in the skin, then the priest shall declare him unclean. It is a striking of *tsaraath*.**

**28 And if the spot has stood steady and has not spread but is dim, it is a swelling from the burn, and the priest shall declare him clean because it [is] the scar of a burn.**

A second condition in which it was common for *tsaraath* to occur was in the scar of a burn. A sign that *tsaraath* might have been starting in the scar was that the scar had a shiny appearance and was pinkish or white in color. If those two conditions existed, the person was to be taken to the priest, and the priest was to look for two additional signs. If the hair in the spot has turned white and the spot appeared to be deeper than the skin, the person had *tsaraath*. The priest was to declare the person unclean.

However, if the hair in the spot was not white and it did not penetrate deeper than the skin but instead it had gained more of its natural color, then the person's condition was questionable. The priest was to shut the person up for seven days for observation. After seven days, the priest was to examine the person again. Then if he should find that the swelling had spread, it was a sign of *tsaraath*. The man was unclean.

But, if the swelling had stayed the same and not spread and if its white color was less obvious, the malady was not *tsaraath*. Instead, the problem was an inflammation of the burn scar. The person was clean.

(f) In hair or beard (13:29-37)

Verses 29-37. **29 And a man or a woman who has a striking on the head or the beard,**

**30 The priest shall examine the striking, and if its appearance is deeper than the skin and the hair in it [is] yellow and thin, then the priest shall declare him unclean. It is an itch, a *tsaraath* of the head or the beard.**

**31 And when the priest examines the eruption of the itch and its appearance is not deeper than the skin and black hair is not in it,**

**then the priest shall shut up the eruption of the itch [for] seven days.**

**32 And the priest shall examine the striking on the seventh day, and if the itch has not spread and no yellow hair is in it and the appearance of the itch is not deeper than the skin**

**33 Then he shall shave himself, but he must not shave the itch, and the priest shall shut up the itch [for] a second seven days.**

**34 And the priest shall examine the itch on the seventh day, and if the itch has not spread in the skin and its appearance is not deeper than the skin, then the priest shall declare him clean. Then he shall wash his clothes and be clean.**

**35 And if the itch spreads in the skin after his cleansing,**

**36 Then the priest shall examine him, and if the itch has spread in the skin, the priest should not seek for the yellow hair. He [is] unclean.**

**37 And if in his eyes the itch has stood steady and black hair has not grown in it, the itch is healed. He is clean, and the priest shall declare him clean.**

*Tsaraath* might break out on the skin under the hair on a man's or a woman's head or under a man's beard. Jehovah used a different word to describe the disease in this verse, which is translated above as "itch." The use of the word "itch" does not indicate that a different disease is under question here. It means that itching of the swollen spot was another possible symptom for the illness. The word comes from a root that means "to pull down" or "to break down." It probably means an itch that causes the person to scratch and tear the skin away. Though the affected spot might itch, itching was not a means of determining if the spot was *tsaraath*. The same signs mentioned above were to be looked for in determining whether or not the malady was really *tsaraath*. If the spot penetrated deeper than the skin and the hair in it had lightened in color, the person had *tsaraath*. In this case, the hair was expected to be yellowish instead of white. In other words, where the hair was thicker, all of the pigment in the hair might not have been lost, leaving it faded and yellowish but not completely white. Another sign of *tsaraath* was that some of the hair would fall out of the affected

spot, making the hair thinner. If the signs of *tsaraath* were present, the person had *tsaraath* of the head or beard. He was unclean.

If, on the other hand, the signs of *tsaraath* were not definitely present, the same procedure of shutting up the person for observation for a second seven-day period was to be followed. An additional provision was made that, if the case was still doubtful after the first week, the hair was to be shaved from around the spot but not on the spot, to make observation easier and the determination more accurate.

If at the end of the second seven-day period the eruption had not spread and the sore had not penetrated deeper than the skin, the priest was to declare the person clean. He or she was only required to wash his clothes, and he was free to return to a normal life. However, if the eruption should spread after the person was declared clean, then the priest was to examine the person again. If indeed the eruption had spread, no further evidence was needed. The priest was to declare the person unclean.

And if at the end of the second seven day period the eruption had not spread and color had returned to the hair, the eruption was to be judged healed, and the priest was to declare the person to be clean.

(g) In clear skin (13:38-39)

Verses 38-39. **38 And a man or a woman who has on the skin of the body spots [that are] white spots,**

**39 The priest shall examine [the person], and if on the skin of the body the spots are a dim white, it [is] *boshap* [that] has broken out in the skin. He [is] clean.**

*Tsaraath* also could occur in a part of the skin that grew no hair. In that case, the only symptom for determining the presence of *tsaraath* was a loss of color in the affected spot. If the spot was not fully white and still somewhat pigmented, the man did not have *tsaraath*. Instead he had the disease the Israelites called *boshap*, and he was

clean. *Boshap* is a transliteration of the Hebrew name of a different disease, with which people of that day were familiar but the identity of which is not known today.

(h) In a bald head (13:40-44)

Verses 40-44. **40 And if a man's head has become bald on the back side of his head, he is bald at the back [but] he is clean.**

**41 And if on the front side his head is bald, he is bald at the front [but] he is clean.**

**42 And if a reddish white stricken spot comes to be on the bald back side of the head or on the bald front side of his head, it is a breaking out of *tsaraath* on the bald back side of his head or on the bald front side of his head.**

**43 Then the priest shall examine him, and if the swelling of the striking [is] reddish white on the bald back side of his head or on the bald front side of his head like the appearance of *tsaraath* in the skin of the body,**

**44 He [is] a man stricken with *tsaraath*. He is unclean. The priest must declare him unclean. His striking [is] on his head.**

*Tsaraath* might also break out on a bald head. These verses first emphasize that baldness by itself did not make a man unclean. Why it needed to be stressed that baldness in and of itself did not make a person unclean is not fully clear. Perhaps baldness at that time was considered in some sense to be shameful or disgraceful. 2 Kings 2:23 may indicate that the Hebrews did have that attitude toward baldness. The rule that baldness did not make a person unclean applied whether the baldness was in the back side of his head or in the front side of his head. The Hebrew language has two words for baldness, one for baldness in the front of the head and the other for baldness in the back of the head. Both words are used in this passage.

In the case of a bald head, the color of the hair could not be used to determine if the malady was *tsaraath*. Two criteria were to be used: the color of the skin was pinkish, and the appearance was like *tsaraath* in regular skin. The priest was to make his judgment on the basis of his familiarity with the appearance of *tsaraath* in other parts of the

body. If the signs of *tsaraath* in a bald head were present, the priest was to declare the person unclean.

(2) Conduct of a person stricken  
with *tsaraath* (13:45-46)

Verses 45-46. **45 And the one having *tsaraath* in whom is the striking, his clothes must be torn and his hair must be loosed, and he must cover his mouth and cry, “Unclean, unclean.”**

**46 All the days that the striking is on him, he must remain unclean. He [is] unclean. He must dwell alone. His dwelling place [must be] outside the camp.**

A person afflicted with *tsaraath* was to conduct himself as a mourner. Tearing one’s clothes was a familiar expression of mourning or sorrow (Gen. 37:34; 44:13; Num. 14:6; Josh. 7:6; Jud. 11:35; II Sam. 1:11; 3:31; 13:19; I Kings 21:27; II Kings 5:7,8; 6:30; 19:1; 22:11,19; II Chr. 34:19,27; Ezra 9:3,5; Esther 4:1; Job 1:20; 2:12; Isa. 37:1). Loosing one’s hair had previously been mentioned in Leviticus 10:6 as a sign of mourning (see comments on that verse in MESSAGE 11). The word translated “mouth” is a rare word. It was related to the Hebrew word for “lip,” “Mouth” seems to be the best rendering, because a natural sign of mourning is covering the mouth as a sign that the sorrow is so great the person is not able to speak. This same expression is used in Ezekiel 24:17, 22 as a sign of mourning.<sup>1</sup> Since *tsaraath* was a symbol of sin, the one having *tsaraath* was to practice those symbols of sorrow as a sign that sin brings sorrow to the life of one who indulges in it. The one having *tsaraath* was also to cry out, “Unclean! Unclean!” to strangers who approached him. Doing so was to be a symbolic declaration of the fact that sin makes a life morally unclean and close association with a sinful person contaminates the lives of others.

<sup>1</sup> SGV and NASB render this word as “moustache,” while RSV, JB, NEV, LB, ABV join KJV in rendering it “upper lip.” ASV translates it “lips,” while DRV and HCSB translate it “mouth.”

As long as *tsaraath* continued in the body of the one stricken with it, he was to dwell away from his brethren outside the camp. His living alone was a symbol of the fact that sin separates a person from other believers. Sin interferes not only with fellowship with God but also with one’s fellowship with God’s people.

b. *Tsaraath* in cloth or leather (13:47-58)

(1) Recognition by a priest of  
*tsaraath* in cloth or leather  
(13:47-55)

Verses 47-48. **47 And the cloth that has a striking of *tsaraath* in it, whether a woolen cloth or a linen cloth,**

**48 In woven cloth or in knitted cloth of linen or wool, or in a hide, or in anything made of leather,**

Another type of uncleanness was *tsaraath* in cloth or leather. Some have supposed that the germ causing *tsaraath* in people also was able to attack cloth and leather. That conclusion is not necessarily valid, especially since people did not know about germs at that time. God knew of germs, but He was speaking in terms that people of that time could understand. Likely *tsaraath* of cloth or leather was a growth of some kind that caused conditions in cloth and leather that resembled *tsaraath* in people. Because of the similarity in appearance, people in that time called both conditions by the same name.

*Tsaraath* in cloth could affect woolen or linen cloth. Wool and linen were virtually the only kinds of cloth available at that time. The words translated “woven cloth” and “knitted cloth” are used in the Bible only in this chapter. The meaning of the root of the first is highly doubtful, while the idea of the root of the second is “mixed.” Traditionally, those words have been understood to mean “warp” and “woof,” but those translations give little meaning that is understandable. It is hard to see how an infection could affect only the threads running in one direction. Some have suggested that *tsaraath* affected only the threads of the warp or the woof of a piece of cloth because the condition was

in the thread when it was woven. However, it is most unlikely that a person would use thread already affected by the condition in making a piece of cloth. A more likely understanding of the meaning of these words is that they refer to two different methods of making cloth, such as, weaving and knitting. This view is most likely the correct understanding of the words, and they are translated in that manner above.<sup>2</sup> Thus, *tsaraath* could affect cloth or leather and could affect cloth whether wool or linen and whether woven or knitted.

Verse 49. **If the striking is greenish or reddish in the cloth or in the hide or in woven cloth or in knitted cloth or in anything made of leather, it [may be] a striking of *tsaraath*. It shall be shown to the priest.**

A suspicious sign that *tsaraath* might be present in cloth or leather was a greenish or reddish coloration. Any piece of cloth or leather so affected was to be taken to the priest for examination.

Verses 50-51. **50 And the priest shall examine the striking and shut up the striking for seven days.**

**51 Then he shall examine the striking on the seventh day. If the striking has spread in the cloth, whether woven or knitted, or in the hide, whatever was done [with] the hide according to its use, the striking is penetrating *tsaraath*. It [is] unclean.**

After examining the piece of cloth or leather, the priest was to “shut it up” for seven days. At the end of seven days, he was to examine the article again to see if the condition had spread. “Shut up” in this case can scarcely mean put outside of the camp, strengthening the conclusion that it also does not have that meaning in verses 4, 5, 26, 31, 33 (see comments on those verses above). If after seven days the spot had spread, it was *tsaraath*. The piece of cloth or leather was unclean. The word translated “penetrating” is found only in

<sup>2</sup> KJV and most other modern English translations translate these words as “warp” and “woof.” JB and LB translate these words as “fabric” and “covering.” SGV translates “woven or knitted material.”

this chapter and in Ezekiel 28:24. Its meaning is not known today. Translators have varied much in rendering it in English.<sup>3</sup> Judging from Ezekiel 38:24, it probably means “piercing” or “penetrating,” indicating that the *tsaraath* had penetrated into the piece of cloth or leather.

(2) Handling of cloth or leather  
stricken with *tsaraath* (13:52-58)

Verse 52. **And he shall burn the cloth whether woven or knitted, woolen or linen, or the article of leather that has the striking in it, for it [is] penetrating *tsaraath*. It must be burned in fire.**

The piece of cloth or leather that had been penetrated by *tsaraath* was to be burned up. Evidently no way was known to rid the cloth or leather of *tsaraath*. This requirement taught that whenever sin becomes an ingrained habit of a person’s life, the sinner will be destroyed by it.

Verses 53-54. **53 And if the priest examines and the striking has not spread in the cloth, whether woven or knitted, or in an article of leather,**

**54 Then the priest shall command, and they shall wash that which the striking [is] in it, and he shall shut it up [for] a second seven days.**

If the spot had not spread after seven days, a second test was to be applied. The piece of cloth or leather was to be washed and “shut up” for seven more days.

Verse 55. **And the priest shall examine [it] after it has been washed [again], and if the striking has not changed color, even if the striking has not spread, it is unclean. You must burn it in fire. It [is] boring inside, [whether it is] on its bare back side or on its shaved front side.**

<sup>3</sup> KJV and ASV use “fretting,” meaning “gnawing” or “eating.” DRV uses “fixed.” RSV, SGV, and NASB, use “malignant.” LV, JV use “contagious.” NEB uses “rotting.” HCSB uses “harmful.” All of these renderings are guesses.

At the end of the second seven-day period, if the coloration of the spot was as bright as ever, it was *tsaraath*, even if it had not spread. The cloth or leather piece was unclean and was to be burned. The word translated “boring inside” occurs only here. It seems to mean that, though the spot had not become larger, it was growing inside the cloth or the leather. It does not seem to mean that the infection had eaten a hole in the piece of cloth or leather, because all other descriptions show the malady to have been a coloration growing on a piece of cloth or leather. It seems rather to mean that the *tsaraath* had grown deeper into the cloth or leather.

The words translated “[whether it is] on its bare back side or on its shaved front side.” mean literally “in his bald back side of his head or in his bald front side of his head.” Translators and interpreters have struggled to explain those words.<sup>4</sup> It may be that they are words added by mistake by an ancient copyist, perhaps by inadvertently picking them up from verse 42. The identical words occur in verse 42 in some ancient manuscripts, though in most manuscripts a slight difference occurs in that they omit the word “his” in verse 42. No manuscripts omit these words in verse 47, so they may have been an idiomatic expression that referred to the bare inside of a piece of leather and to the hairy outside from which the hair had been removed in processing the leather. They are translated in that manner above.

Verses 56-57. **56 And if the priest examines and the striking is dim after it is washed, he shall tear it out of the cloth or the leather or from the woven or knitted [piece].**

**57 Then if it appears again in the cloth, whether woven or knitted, or in the leather, it is spreading. You must burn with fire that which the striking is in it.**

<sup>4</sup> KJV, AS, and RV translate these words as “within or without,” BBE as “inside or outside,” CJB as “on the inside or on the outside,” LITV as “in its inside or in its outside,” MSG as “the back or the front,” NASB as “on the top or on the front of it,” and HCSB as “on the front or on the back.” CEV omits these words altogether.

If at the end of the second seven-day period the coloration was not as bright, then another test was to be applied. The affected part was to be torn from the piece. It was not removed to prevent the *tsaraath* from spreading in the piece, because if it had been known that the spot was *tsaraath* the piece would have been destroyed immediately. Instead this action was another test to determine if the piece was affected by *tsaraath*. After cutting out the spot, if the coloration reappeared in the rest of the garment, it was *tsaraath*. The piece was unclean. It was to be burned. Evidently *tsaraath* could not be removed from cloth or leather. No cleansing ceremony was provided for cloth or leather affected by *tsaraath*. Instead they were to be destroyed. The destruction of the piece taught that, when sin becomes ingrained in the life of a believer, it will destroy that life.

**Verse 58. And the cloth, woven or knitted or any article of leather that you washed and the striking has departed, then it shall be washed a second time and be clean.**

If at the end of the second seven-day period the coloration was gone, the spot was not *tsaraath*. The words “that you washed” refer to the washing mentioned in verse 54. It had been washed and then observed for a second seven-day period. If the color had disappeared, the piece of cloth or leather was clean. It had never been unclean, but it had been under suspicion. Like the clothing of the man in verse 6, it was to be washed again to remove any suspicion, and it was clean.

Summary Note (13:59)

**Verse 59. This is the law for a striking of *tsaraath* in cloth of wool or linen, whether woven or knitted, or in an article of leather, whether clean or whether unclean.**

This verse is a summary statement, stating that the passage above gives the principles that were to govern recognition of *tsaraath* and uncleanness from *tsaraath* in woolen or linen cloth whether woven or knitted and also in articles made of leather. Comparison with other summary notes (see references cited in comments on Lev. 11:46-47)

indicates that it was written by Moses as he compiled the MESSAGES of Jehovah, rather than that it was a part of the MESSAGE that was spoken by Jehovah.

After examining this passage, it is possible to speculate on the nature of *tsaraath* in cloth and leather. Many have supposed that it was a form of mold or mildew. Since the Sinai desert and that whole area of the world are extremely dry and since

mold and mildew thrive only in much dampness, this explanation seems unlikely. Also, mold and mildew are greenish but not reddish. So, the descriptions of this chapter do not fit mold or mildew. It seems more likely that it was a type of fungus growth, since fungus growths can thrive in dry conditions and are more penetrating and persistent.

### **Application**

When a Christian allows sin to come into his life, he becomes morally unclean. His sin separates between him and his Christian brothers and sisters and between him and God. It also brings sorrow into his life. When it becomes an ingrained habit, it destroys his physical life. Though he is saved forever, he can suffer great damage if he allows himself to participate in sin. The Christian must make every effort to avoid contact with sin and to keep it out of his life.

A Christian must also take care to prevent articles that belong to him from being used for sinful purposes. He should not allow cloth or leather clothing that belongs to him to be worn to a bar, a casino, a pornographic movie, or to any other place where sinful deeds are practiced. Allowing his clothes, his car, or any other possession to be used in some sinful activity damages his reputation and makes him more susceptible to participating in sinful deeds himself. If he makes the mistake of allowing his possessions to be misused, he should ask God for forgiveness and rededicate them to God through prayer and through making a commitment never to make that mistake again.