

Soap in the Bible???

The importance of handwashing is all over the news and social media right now—how to wash hands, how long to wash hands, when to wash hands. I'm glad it is. It has always been important, but it can literally be the difference between life and death right now. I don't know about you, but my hands are dried out and cracked in places from frequent handwashing and use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

One of my many jobs I have had as a nurse was teaching nursing students at FHU. I loved teaching those bright, eager students both textbook information in the classroom and nursing skills in the lab and real-life hospital settings. The very first skill we would teach our students was proper handwashing. It's not a particularly difficult skill to learn compared to others, but an extremely important skill. It was viewed as so important, that students had to perform the skill in front of an instructor for a grade just like more difficult skills such as IV insertion. In a hospital setting, proper handwashing has always been a high priority.

I find it very fascinating that our understanding of how handwashing works is only a few centuries old. One of the more interesting (and quite frankly, gross) accounts of how physicians started to realize exactly how this practice works took place in Vienna, Austria in 1847. A young physician named Ignaz Semmelweis was assigned over a maternity ward for impoverished mothers. This maternity ward had an alarming death rate of 13-18% from mothers dying of a mysterious fever after delivery. Another maternity ward at the hospital which was staffed only by midwives had only a 2% death rate by fever. Semmelweis was alarmed and started investigating why there was such a high fever and death rate at the ward he was overseeing. He found the doctors in training at his maternity ward were performing autopsies between delivering babies. He theorized that these doctors were bringing "cadaverous particles" into the delivery rooms on their often still foul-smelling hands. By having them scrub their hands in a chlorinated lime solution before patient contact and especially after contact with the corpses, he was able to bring death rates in his maternity ward down to only 2%. When he attempted to introduce this concept to the rest of the medical community at the time he was instead ridiculed. He became angry and began writing hostile letters to his colleagues calling them "murderers". It wasn't received well and he was eventually thrown into an insane asylum where he died from gangrenous wounds after being beaten. It wasn't until much later when he was posthumously recognized for his discovery. We were slow to learn.

Did you know that God addressed this with children of Israel some 3,500 years ago? God gave Moses and Aaron orders for the people to wash their hands and a recipe for the soap to be used after anyone had contact with a dead body. Don't take my word for it, rather I would encourage you to read Numbers 19 yourselves for a full account of the story. The children of Israel may not have even understood at the time what God was having them to do. You see, washing their hands after touching a corpse wasn't just a symbolic washing the unclean (death) from themselves. It was a literal washing away of microorganisms and this happened thousands of years before we understood germ theory. What seems like a strange concoction of ashes,

hyssop, cedar, and scarlet wool combined with running water is actually a wonderful anti-bacterial method of washing hands. Today we know that you can make lye (a soap our great-grandmothers would have used) by a method that involves running water through ashes. Hyssop contains a chemical called thymol which is a known anti-septic. Cedar wood contains an oil that would have been a minor skin irritant and would have encouraged scrubbing. The scarlet wool would have added fibers to the mixture much like some soaps that we use today that have pumice or walnut shell to provide additional removal of dirt and grime. We also now know that the use of running water to wash hands is far superior to using stagnant water. God was commanding them to wash their hands with soap and water after having contact with a dead body. This would have prevented the spread of diseases among the Israelites.

I love God's word and it is especially exciting for me when scripture proves itself to be thousands of years ahead of science. I hope you can find time during this health crisis to draw near to God by spending much time in His word. Now is a great time to binge read your Bible.

Feel free to contact me with any questions or comments by call or text at 731-225-0719 or by email at shannongu3@bellsouth.net .

In Him,
Shannon Guthrie, RN, MSN