

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD AS A LOCAL CHURCH Numbers 10:1-36

INTRODUCTION

There is a word that we Americans have a hard time saying and a much harder time doing. The verb, “to submit” and the corresponding noun “submission” are very distasteful words to our radically individualistic culture. In the premarital and marital counseling that I do I regularly work through Paul’s instructions to wives and husbands in Ephesians 5. As many of you know, God commands wives “to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ.” Frankly, I have a hard time saying that word “submit.” No matter how I explain it and nuance it, the idea that a wife is obligated by God to place her wants and desires under the wants and desires of her husband remains unpleasant to me. The NT is littered with commands to Christians to submit to their leaders, the pastors/elders God has appointed over them. Again, I find it very difficult to use that language when I preach and when I talk personally with people. Children are commanded to submit to their parents, workers are commanded to submit to their employers, citizens are commanded to submit to their governing authorities and in a remarkably universal command, Paul says in Ephesians 5:21, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” So every person in this room is commanded by God to submit not only to those in authority over you but to the person sitting next to you.

Submission requires that I do not pursue my own personal agenda but that I restrain myself, I deny my desires and set aside my plans in order to conform to the desires and plans of another. It is this restraining of our own desires in order to conform to the desires of another that we Americans find so abhorrent. The reasons for our aversion to the word and the act of submitting to others are numerous and we do not have time to investigate them now. However, the fact that we, because we belong to this culture, are not naturally inclined to conform to the wishes of another person or a group is certain. The individual self is sovereign in our culture. We each individually are the determiners of what is right and good and we each have not only the right but the duty to determine our own course in life. We believe it is the height of stupidity to give control over any part of your life to another person or group. People who alter their lifestyle for the sake of the group are suspected of being neurotic.

While the word “submit” does not appear in Numbers 10, yet this chapter is based upon the most radical kind of submission. The only way that any individual Israelite can make it safely through the wilderness and into the land of Promise is to live in submission to the group. It doesn’t matter what you want or what is going on in your personal life, when the group moves, you move and when the group stops, you stop. The entire program of God dwelling with his people, bringing them through the desert and giving them the land of Canaan requires that each individual submit his own personal desires and agendas to the will of the group under the leadership of God through Moses. Quite plainly, if you are not part of the group you are not part of the salvation.

This is not only an OT concept; it is the same in the NT. While Jesus saves individuals, yet the individuals that he saves are part of his church, his flock, his body, the people who belong to his Father who the Father gave to him, the elect, the family of God, the kingdom of God, etc. The point of the NT is this: you are not saved simply by joining with a local church but everyone who is saved by Jesus is united to a local church and lives in submission to it. Just as each individual Israelite only came safely through the wilderness and into the land of Promise by submitting to God’s leading of the entire nation, so we will only make it safely to heaven as we travel through this wilderness world in submission to Christ’s leadership through his church. This morning we will see why it is that submission to Jesus in the church is the only way to obtain safe passage to heaven.

MAIN POINT

Safe passage to heaven is only obtained by traveling with the church because...

I. God only summons his church (vv. 1-9)

While the instructions regarding the silver trumpets were given prior to the events in Numbers 1-6, yet they are recorded here for an obvious reason. Their first use is to summon the nation of Israel to pack up and head for the Promised Land which is what happens in v. 10. I want to summarize how God wanted the trumpets used in Israel, to see how they were used in the rest of the OT and then see how they foreshadowed Christ and his relationship to the church. First, it is the priests who are given the task of blowing on the trumpets throughout all of Israel's history (v. 8). Second, during the wilderness travels the trumpets were used to summon the whole nation of Israel to come meet Moses at the entrance of the tent of meeting (v.3 & 7) or to summon just the leaders to come meet Moses at the tent of meeting (v. 4). Coming to meet Moses at the tent can be for only one purpose and that is to receive God's instructions, God's word for the people. Also, in the wilderness the trumpets were used to announce to each of the tribes when it was their turn to set out on the march (vv. 5-6).

Third, once the people had reached the Promised Land the trumpets were to be used to sound the alarm to go to war against enemies and to announce the sacrifices being made in the temple during the three feasts and at the beginning of each month. In other words the trumpets were used to call the people to war and to worship. But notice also that sounding the trumpets for each of these purposes was not only for the sake of the people but also, the trumpets would cause the people to be remembered before the Lord (vv. 9-10). Thus he would hear the trumpets and come to save them from their enemies and he would hear the trumpets and accept their sacrifices and worship. So the trumpets when blown by the priests summon the people to God and his purposes and they remind God of the people, of the promises he has made to them.

In most of the rest of the OT the trumpets are used in exactly the way that Numbers commands their use once Israel has reached the land of Canaan. They are used to sound the alarm for war and to call the people to worship. On one occasion the trumpets call for God to help in a battle. The priests in the OT foreshadow Jesus and so the blowing of the trumpets by the priests show Jesus calling us to come and listen to his word, calling us to follow him as his disciples, summoning us to fight the fight of faith and summoning us to come and worship. Also, we can see how Jesus, our priest, is reminding our heavenly Father to come to our aid in the fight and to accept our worship. Jesus daily intercedes for us before God the Father so that he sends forth his HS to give us aid against our enemy and by his blood shed for us, our Father accepts our half-hearted and tainted acts of worship and prayer.

We have to ask ourselves if we are responding to this summons from Jesus as a group. Are we coming together, both as a congregation and as leadership to listen to his word? Are we following him? Is our life together being ordered by his commands, his priorities? Are we joining together to fight against our sins and the temptations of this world system which is ruled over by the devil? Are we working together to advance the concerns of God's kingdom, his rule over his world? Are we joining together to pray and to worship? Are each of us laying aside our own personal agendas to engage in these things as the gathered people of God?

The most explicit way in which the OT prophets and the NT use the sounding of the trumpets relates to the final day of the Lord, which is the return of Jesus. Listen to Isaiah 27:13, "And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem." Zechariah 9:14, in a passage about the coming of the Messiah, "Then the LORD will appear over them, and his arrow will go forth like lightning; the Lord GOD will sound the trumpet and will march forth in the whirlwinds of the south." In these OT texts the great and final day of the Lord when he summons his people to come and worship on Mt. Zion and when he marches out in battle to destroy his enemies is announced by the sounding of a great trumpet.

In the same way, in the NT that day of the Lord, when Jesus returns for his people is announced by the blowing of a great trumpet. Matthew 24:31, "And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, "Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be

changed.” There is a day coming when all of God’s church, all of his people will be raised from the dead and gathered to Jesus where we will live with him forever as a worshipping, obedient community, united by Christ himself into the one people of God made up of people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation. That day will be announced by the blowing of the trumpet.

The main thing to see here is this: the sounding of the trumpets is always for the people of God, the church. The trumpets are not sounded for the sake of anyone who is not part of the church. Whether we think of Jesus now summoning us to come and listen or to follow or to fight or to worship or we think of him calling God to our aid or to accept our worship or whether we think of that great final day when the last trumpet is sounded and we are gathered to Jesus, the sounding of the trumpet is only for those who belong to the church and thus are part of a local church. Therefore, if you are not a part of the people of God as expressed in a local church you will not hear the sound of the trumpet and so you will miss God’s word and you will not follow where he leads and he will not come to fight for you, your worship will not be accepted and you will not be gathered to Jesus when he comes. So listen to Jesus summoning you to join with his people so that you can follow him safely through this wilderness world to our heavenly home.

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- *And because...*

II. God only leads his church (vv. 10-28)

In v. 10 we return to the chronological story line of the people of Israel. Thus 19 days after the people of Israel are counted as recorded in Numbers 1; 50 days after the tabernacle was first set up as recorded in Exodus 40; 11 months after Israel arrived at Mt. Sinai as recorded in Exodus 19; and almost 14 months after the exodus from Egypt as recorded in Exodus 12; the cloud of God lifts from over the tabernacle and begins to move across the wilderness, northwest, towards the land of Canaan. At the lifting of the cloud the priests blow the trumpets and Judah sets out at the head of the people of Israel, followed by Issachar and Zebulun. Then come the Levitical clans of Gershon and Merari carrying the tent coverings and the curtains and the frames and the bases in their ox carts. These are followed by Reuben and Simeon and Gad. Then the Levitical clan of the Kohathites carry the covered over sacred objects on poles and frames on their shoulders. Following them is the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin. Finally, acting as a rear guard are the tribes of Dan, Asher and Naphtali. They march forth as God’s army, with God leading them into war so that they might find a place of rest.

As we see Israel strike camp and head out across the desert I want you to use your imagination with me for a moment. They have been camped in this one place for about 11 months. While the main action has been God’s giving them the law through Moses, the setting up of the tabernacle, the establishment of the priesthood and Levites with their work at the tabernacle and the census, yet we should remember that the people have also been living their daily lives. Each day they gather and prepare the manna that has fallen during the night. There have been deaths among the people and births and marriages. This isn’t a group of monks who do nothing but pray. It is a vast community of families and extended families. There are economic transactions taking place. There are family squabbles and family parties. There are judges resolving disputes between individuals and families.

While all of this daily activity is taking place, suddenly the cloud lifts, the trumpets blow and whatever you were doing has to stop and you have to pack up your belongings and get your family together and be ready to start walking when it is your turn to go. It doesn’t matter what you were doing, what you had planned for that day, when the cloud moves and the trumpet sounds; you get in line and start walking. You can’t say, “We’re having a birthday party for grandpa today so you guys go on ahead and we’ll catch up.” Or, “Grandma’s dying, we have to wait for her to go, then we’ll join you.” “I’m getting married today. We have the rabbi lined up, the reception tent is all decorated, the relatives are coming from all over the camp; it’s too late to cancel. We can’t go now.” To be part of Israel, to go to the Land of Promise, to live with God required a radical submission to do what the group did and to go where the group went.

Thinking about what each individual Israelite and Israelite family did reminded me of a series of conversations that Jesus had with several people who were in the crowds following him. Luke 9:57-10:1, “As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, let me first go and bury my father.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Yet another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’” In each case the people who are being summoned to follow Jesus hold back, not because they are engaged in some great sin activity but because the ordinary things of life are of a higher priority than following Jesus. In essence they are saying, “I’ll be along later.” Jesus says that anyone who does not follow now will not be a part of his kingdom. Following Jesus requires us at times to not use our time to do ordinary things that are not sinful. It requires submission.

This command comes from the one who is most often described as the head of his church, which is his body or the shepherd of his sheep, or most often described as “our” Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In other words Jesus is our leader, not just my leader; he is our Lord, our Savior, not just my Lord, my Savior. Therefore, when we say that we are followers of Jesus that means we regularly submit our private plans, the use of our time, our money, our resources to the plans and activities of our church. If I am going to say that I am a follower of the one who is the head of his church then that means I am going to be submitting to, going along with the church.

Let me be honest with you right here. I have the strongest urge to make a very strong qualifying statement right here. I want to say that doesn’t mean we are supposed to come to every church activity or only spend our time with the other members of the church. It doesn’t mean we are to ignore our family to do stuff at church. That would be a true thing to say. However, I am highly suspicious of my negative reaction to asserting that following Jesus is not simply a private affair but requires that I follow him in company with a group and thus not just doing what I want but doing what the group wants. I know that we, as Americans, are naturally disinclined to change our plans or our family’s plans for the sake of the group’s plans. We take care of ourselves and our families first and then we think about what others in the church need or what the organization that is the church needs. I can’t tell you what this is going to look like in your case or with regard to your family. I only know that as I think about Israel in the wilderness following the cloud and as I think about Jesus’ call to follow him as the head of his church, I know that means I must think about the group that is the church, not just me and my family and I must act in accord with, in submission to the church.

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III. God only blesses and defends his church (vv. 29-36)

Moses’ conversation with his brother-in-law, Hobab, as recorded in vv. 29-32 at first seems really out of place. Yet the more I thought about the fact that God only saves those who belong to his church, the more obvious the reason for the inclusion of this conversation became. This is Moses’ wife’s brother who is a Midianite, which means he is not Jewish, he is not a part of God’s people by birth. So Moses invites this non-Jewish man to join them, not only on the journey but he is also inviting him to have a share of the land of Canaan. “Join us because we are going to take possession of a land flowing with milk and honey which God himself has promised to give to us. God has promised to do good to us and thus by joining us you will participate in the good that God does to us.” Hobab says he will not go; rather he plans to go home (v. 30). You ought to hear right at this point the guy who can’t follow Jesus right now because he has to bury his dad or because he needs to go say good bye. Or you might think of Jesus’ parable of the wedding feast where the king invited people to come to the wedding

of his son and they all gave excuses like, “I’ve just bought a team of oxen and I need to try them out” or “I just bought some land and need to go check it out.” Hobab is more interested in home than being a part of God’s kingdom and family and land. He prefers the pleasures of home to the pleasures of belonging to God and inheriting eternal life. He would rather gain the whole world than lose his life for the sake of Jesus and thus gain real life. Here is Jesus calling all who are outside the church to come join his church so that he might bless them. This is us bearing witness to the crucified and resurrected Christ, calling others to come join us as God’s people so that they can obtain property in the Promised Land.

Moses doesn’t take no for an answer but gives him another reason for why he should go with them. He tells him that they need his wisdom and insight to find water and grass for their flocks in the desert. (Someone might ask: why do they need a human guide when God himself is leading them by the cloud? The answer is that there is more to living in the desert than just finding a good camp site. This shows that God leads his people and uses wise people to help us figure out the details. For example: God commands us to gather regularly as his people to worship him. However there is no order of worship in the Bible so wise people have to figure out the order of worship. It doesn’t tell us where to worship and so we need leaders to figure that out. But I digress.) The point is that Moses tells Hobab he should go with Israel because he cares about Israel and their well-being. We follow Jesus not only because we believe he and his salvation are better than everything else but also because we love his people. Repeatedly in the NT these are the two marks of true Christians: faith in Jesus and love for Jesus’ people. Then again, in v. 32, he restates the main reason to go with Israel: God has promised to bless his people and so if you are part of us, then you will be blessed by God along with us. The conversation simply ends here and we are not told whether or not Hobab goes along. This is a rhetorical device and serves as an invitation to every reader of this text. What about you? What will you choose? Will you choose this familiar world and all its pleasures or will you choose to follow Christ by joining with his people on this difficult journey through the wilderness to heaven?

Finally, this passage ends with a description of what Moses prays whenever the cloud lifts from over the tabernacle and the people set out on the march and what he prays when the cloud stops and the people encamp. This is the prayer of Jesus, that prophet like Moses who is greater than Moses, for his church. He prays that God would go before us and scatter all his and thus our enemies. Jesus prays exactly like this as recorded in John 17 the night before he was betrayed. He prayed that God would keep us, his church, safe, protecting us by his word. Then Jesus prays that the Father would remain with us and not leave us, just as Moses prays that God would return to his myriad people, Israel. We pray that our warrior God lead us and protect us from all harm in this world and we pray that our loving God live with us and not abandon us, as he has promised.

Whenever a landing party is sent down to a planet from the starship “Enterprise” in the TV show or movie, “Star Trek” you know that the guy who leaves the landing party and goes off by himself is going to end up dead or worse. In every scary movie the audience yells at the girl that leaves the group of people stranded in the old house and goes off exploring on her own. We know in our TV shows and movies that the only people who are going to survive are the ones that stay with the group. If you leave the group, you will perish. That’s the point of this passage and of the prayer that Moses and Jesus pray. God’s blessing and his protection and his leadership are only being given to his church as expressed in local churches. Therefore the only way to know his leadership and blessing and protection is to stay with, to submit yourself to the group, which is the family of God.

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