

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD AS HIS SAVED AND WORSHIPPING PEOPLE

Numbers 28:1-29:40

INTRODUCTION

We are social creatures with a powerful need to belong to a group. Even the most anti-social people among us want to know that they matter to someone, that they are a valued member of a group. Some of the saddest people I know are those who feel like they are outsiders, that there is no group that values them and their participation. We all have experienced that feeling of being an outsider and of wanting to belong. I asked our church administrator, Melissa, this week if she had ever wanted to be part of a group from which she was excluded. She immediately told about how, as a child, she wanted to be a part of the Girl Scouts. One day every week she would walk with her friends after school and they would all turn aside to go to their Girl Scout meeting while she had to go work in her dad's printing business. She wanted to belong to the Girl Scouts but could not and thus felt like an outsider to her friends. Most of us have had that sort of experience; some of us feel like that all the time.

I have good news this morning for every person who has ever felt left out, cut off from belonging. You can be part of the most significant social group in the world, the very family of God which is the church of Jesus Christ. There is no more favored or important group of people in the universe than those people who are able to call God their Father, who can say with certainty that they are members of the people of God. Belonging to the family of God is better than having 1000 Facebook friends. It is better than belonging to a warm and loving family. It is far better than being a citizen of the USA. The main thing that God has been doing in the world ever since he made it has been to make a people of his very own. This is the story of the Bible. God made the world and created humans in it so that he could make a family with whom he could live and whom he could love forever. However, due to human rebellion God kicked humans out of his presence. Therefore, humans, by nature, because of sin, are outsiders, excluded from the only group that matters.

But, again, the good news is that God has been working ever since he removed human beings from his fellowship to make a people who will once again live with him in his land. This is the story of the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel. How often have we heard God say to these former slaves that he chose them out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession? He aims to be their God and for them to be his people. As we have followed their story from slavery in Egypt to Mt. Sinai through 40 years in the desert to now camped on the eastern shore of the Jordan River we have seen how God has acted not on the basis of what they deserve but according to his grace. We know these are a sinful people. We have witnessed their whining and complaining and grumbling against God, their outright rejection of him when they made and worshipped the golden calf, their rejection of his promise to bring them into the Promised Land, their desire to overthrow God's appointed leader and savior, Moses and finally, their adulterous pursuit of the women and gods of Moab. So we clearly understand that the only reason these people are God's people is because he has, by grace, chosen them and committed himself to them.

Most of us modern Bible readers, as we come to these two chapters describing all the sacrifices and religious holy days and festivals that Israel is supposed to follow, are either exasperated or bored or both. We are tempted to say, "Really, we just had to read through a whole book of the Bible describing all these sacrifices and festivals. Wasn't that enough? Why in the world does God feel it is so necessary to repeat himself?" Let me assure you, God is not simply repeating himself. There are numerous and significant differences between this description of the sacrifices and religious holy days and festivals and those given earlier in Exodus and Leviticus. The organization of these two chapters is pretty straight forward. As vv.1-2 say it is a list of both the quantity of sacrifices to be offered on behalf of all the people of Israel and the timing of those sacrifices. It begins with describing what sacrifices are to be offered every day, then every week on Saturday, that is, the Sabbath, then on the first day of every month and finally those which are offered each year. The yearly holy

days and festivals are listed in chronological order. The chief difference between this list and all that precede it is that these offerings and festivals are for the entire community of Israel whereas most of what was commanded prior to this was instructions for individual Israelites (Compare to Leviticus 1-4). This is a description of what God wants done for all Israel and by all Israel as represented by the priests in the temple.

These sacrifices and holy days and festivals are the means by which God reminds them of how it is that they have become his people and they are the means by which they express their common identity as God's people. These sacrifices and communal celebrations describe how the holy God makes a people for himself. Thus, they are a description of how we sinful outsiders can become and live as the ultimate insiders, as members of God's forever family. This is a description of how we who were once excluded from citizenship among God's people have now become the very people of God by his grace.

MAIN POINT

The holy God has made us his people by his grace therefore...

I. We rest from our work as we anticipate entering his eternal rest

One of the most obvious things about this description of the sacrifices and holy days in the religious calendar of Israel is the emphasis on the number seven. It first appears in his reference to the Sabbath, which is the seventh day of the week, Saturday. There are seven holy days/feasts listed: Sabbath, New Moon, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, Day of Trumpet blowing, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles. The two most important feasts, Unleavened and Tabernacles are both seven days long. During the course of the year in addition to the rest commanded to be taken on the weekly Sabbath there are seven other days on which Israel is commanded to do no work but to rest. As the 7th day is set apart from the other days of the week, so the 7th month is set apart from the other months of the year as it has three feasts in it with 10 of the 28 days being given to religious observance. In the monthly and the yearly feasts there are seven or 14 lambs offered as burnt offerings. In the Feast of Unleavened Bread there are 14 bulls, 7 rams, 49 lambs and 7 goats offered (all sevens or multiples of seven). At the Feast of Tabernacles there were 70 bulls, 14 rams, 98 lambs and 7 goats offered, again all sevens or multiples thereof. Finally, you will notice that in the Feast of Tabernacles (29:12-34), which begins on the 15th day of the 7th month that there is a decreasing number of bulls offered on each succeeding day of the feast beginning with 13 bulls on the first day of the feast and then ending with seven bulls offered on the seventh day of the feast.

So why is God so taken up with the number 7? The answer goes back to the beginning of creation when God created the heavens and the earth in six days and then he rested on the seventh day. Thus the number seven is a sign, a symbol of God working and then resting. In fact, in Exodus 31:17 in a passage in which God tells Israel that they must keep the Sabbath day, the seventh day of each week holy by doing no work on it he gives them this reason for why to do no work on Saturday, the Sabbath "is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed." However, God is not simply interested in Israel remembering what he did in the past. At the beginning of that passage in Exodus 31 in which he is commanding Israel to keep the Sabbath day holy he says to Moses, "You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, 'Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you (Exodus 31:13).'" When God says he is the one who sanctifies Israel he is saying that he is the one who chooses and makes these descendants of Abraham into his holy people, people who belong to him alone.

As the 7th day of rest is a sign, so the number seven in this passage describing the religious calendar of Israel is a sign of the same thing. Signs are not the thing itself but a representation of the real thing. The sign points to what is real. Just as God created the universe and then rested so God is now creating a holy people whom he will one day bring into his eternal rest. God is the one doing the work. All of these religious observances and animal sacrifices do not accomplish salvation. He is the one making a holy people, just like he once made a holy world. When God finishes that work he will rest and just as in the original creation Adam and Eve joined

him in his seventh day rest, so all those people whom God makes holy will enter into that eternal day of rest with him. Every believing Israelite would recognize in all these days of rest and in the repetition of the number 7 that it is God alone who does everything necessary to make his people holy and to bring them into his rest, just like it was God alone who made the universe and rested on the seventh day.

It is the sign of the Sabbath and the number 7 that stands behind Jesus' invitation to everyone who is weary of their own sinfulness and burdened by their inability to stop sinning and make themselves holy to come to him because when we do he gives us rest (Matthew 11:28-30). He makes us holy without our help. This is what Jesus means when he claims to be "Lord of the Sabbath", that is, he is the sovereign Lord who alone is able to give God's Sabbath rest to his believing people. This is what the author to the Hebrews means when he says that the way we enter into God's promised rest is by trusting in Jesus alone as the one who did all the work on our behalf. He obeyed every law of God for us. He suffered the hell that we deserve for all our sins. He gives us the HS who creates in us new hearts that trust and love him. He is the one who sanctifies us while we do nothing. We rest in him so that when he has finished the work of creating a holy people we might enter the final eternal rest in the renewed heavens and earth. So friend, stop working so hard to prove to God that you're not that bad, that you really are a good person. You are bad. You are not a good person. You have no ability to save yourself or to change yourself. Stop working so hard and come to Christ and let him do all the work for you. Rest in him and then live in joyful anticipation of that final day of rest that is ours by his work.

II. We remember and rejoice in our crucified Savior

Another thing that is very striking about this description is the large number of animals that are slaughtered every year. What we have here is the minimum number of animals offered in sacrifice each year. Notice in 29:39 that what is commanded here does not take into account all the other offerings that individual Israelites would make as a result of vows or cleanliness rituals or the other innumerable reasons an animal sacrifice would be needed. Just think with me about what is being described here. Every single day of every year, a year old male lamb that is without any physical defect is offered in the morning and then another in the late afternoon. These are burnt offerings. This means the animal is killed, the blood drained into a bowl and thrown against the side of the altar and then the entire animal is burned up on the altar of burnt offering. In addition to each of the lambs about 2 liters of flour are burned up with each one and a quart of olive oil and a quart of wine are poured out at the base of the altar. So if you were an Israelite living in the conquered land of Canaan, every day of the year, while you are going about your business: playing with your children, working your land, eating with your family, flirting with the boy next door, herding your sheep, cleaning the house, playing games with the other children the priests in the tabernacle or temple are killing a male lamb for you every morning and every evening, confessing and thus placing the sins of the nation, that is, your sins, upon it, prior to killing it.

Then, every Saturday, while you and your family and all your servants and all your animals do no work the priests not only offer the daily sacrifice of two male lambs they also kill two other male lambs and offer them in the same way along with the flour, oil and wine. Then on the first day of every month they offer 2 bulls, 1 ram and 7 male, year old, unblemished lambs as burnt offerings with the flour, oil and wine along with 1 male goat for a sin offering. This takes place while you go about your business. You just live your life and the priest makes the offerings on behalf of all who belong to the people of God. If you are not an Israelite, then the offerings in the temple were not for you. You had to belong by birth or by conversion to Israel to be under the blood of these sacrifices.

Now we get to the annual feasts. On the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish year, every family in Israel kills a male, year old, unblemished lamb and roasts it whole and then has a meal together that evening. In this way all Israel remembers that the Lord passed over their houses because they had spread the blood of the lamb on their doorways and so the angel of death did not kill the firstborn son in their households. While each family celebrates the Passover, killing those tens of thousands of lambs, the priests still offer the morning and the evening lamb sacrifices. Then on the following day, the Feast of Unleavened Bread begins with all the men of Israel gathering at the tabernacle, no one in Israel does any work and the priests offer 2 bulls, 1 ram, 7 lambs

as burnt offerings and 1 male goat as a sin offering. Then during the next five days, while everyone goes back to work the same offerings are made on each of those days by the priests, while no one in Israel eats any bread with yeast in it. In addition, on each of these days the priests offer the lamb in the morning and the other in the evening. The seventh day is another day of gathering at the temple and doing no work and the priests making all those sacrifices.

Then 50 days later, during the third month of the Jewish year, is the Feast of Weeks or in the Greek language, Pentecost. This is the day when the first portions of the harvest are brought to the tabernacle. It too is a day with another gathering of all the men of Israel at the tabernacle and no one does any work. The priests again offer 2 bulls, 1 ram, 7 lambs as burnt offerings and 1 male goat as a sin offering, together with all the flour and oil and wine that each requires. On that day also, the priests offer the morning and evening sacrifices. Then we come to the seventh month. I won't go into all the details. There are three feasts during this month. 2 of them are a day in length and one of them is 7 days in length, followed by a concluding, special 8th day. On four days in this seventh month all the men gather at the tabernacle and no one does any work in Israel. The total number of animals offered in this seventh month is as follows: 76 bulls, 18 rams, over 190 lambs as burnt offerings together with the flour, oil and wine and then 11 male goats as sin offerings.

The total, minimum number of sacrifices made each year is 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1086 male lambs and 30 goats offered by the priests at the tabernacle or temple. Also more than a ton of flour is burned up and over a thousand quart bottles of oil and wine are poured out. In addition to all these sacrifices are the tens of thousands of lambs slaughtered on the day of Passover and the tens of thousands of animals slaughtered by individual Israelites for fulfilling vows, performing cleanliness rituals, expressing personal thanksgiving, etc.

The NT says that all these sacrifices are a shadow of Christ and his saving work (Hebrews 10:1). That is a very appropriate word picture. Christ is the real, solid object of which these sacrifices and religious observances are but a shadow on the ground. When you see the shadow, you know there is a real object causing the shadow. For thousands of years the shadow of the crucified Savior, Jesus Christ was thrown across the Jewish people through these feasts, holy days and all the sacrifices and offerings associated with them. This explains why Jesus so often said to the Jewish leadership who refused to believe in him as the Messiah, "have you never read." This is why Jesus said that Moses wrote about him.

There are scores of ways in which the NT describes the real Christ who is revealed in these two chapters and the rituals prescribed here. I am just going to draw attention to three. First, is it any wonder, in view of the 1086 year old, unblemished, male lambs that were offered each year, 2 of which were offered every day, along with the tens of thousands offered on Passover that John the Baptist says of Jesus when he first sees him: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Is it any wonder that Peter would say, "for you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver and gold and that you were redeemed from your empty way of life, inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." Every one of those thousands of lambs as it was killed and its blood thrown against the altar and its body burned to ash on the altar was a sign pointing to the slaying of God's perfect lamb. The death of those lambs could not pay the penalty for sin because they were animals. Ah, but the perfect Son of God, who perfectly obeyed the Father was indeed the unblemished Lamb of God who, when he died upon that cross, takes away our sins.

Second, think about all the blood from all those animals that was in the tabernacle. The blood stained ground, the blood stained altar, the blood stained clothing of the priests were the most noticeable part of the tabernacle. You could not enter without being confronted by the blood. Jesus says to his disciples the night before he dies as he institutes the communion meal: Matthew 26:27-28, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Paul writes in Romans 3:25 that God presented Christ as "a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" and then later in 5:9, "Since, therefore we have now been justified by his blood..." In Ephesians 3:13 Paul says it is by the blood of Christ that we have been brought near to God. The blood of Christ shed upon that cross which is the satisfaction of God's just

anger against us secures forgiveness of sins and justification and nearness to God. The blood of all those animals through all those years pointed to that precious blood shed on that cross for everyone who believes.

Third, God says 11 times in these two chapters, that all those sacrifices, the animals with the flour and oil and wine are “a pleasing aroma” to him. To God those sacrifices are like the smell of the Thanksgiving meal being prepared. It is a reminder to him of the fellowship that he will enjoy with his people by means of them. In Ephesians 5:2 Paul tells us that Christ offered himself “as an offering and a sacrifice to God for a pleasing aroma.” Thus the smell of those burning animals and flour, mixed with the pungent odor of blood and oil and wine was pleasing to God because it was the foreshadowing of the best smelling sacrifice to be made, the death of Jesus. It was by that death that the final banquet when God will dine with all of his redeemed people in the new heavens and the new earth was secured.

Remember, these sacrifices are carried out in the temple by the priests on behalf of the people of Israel. The people do not participate in them, the priests do them for the people. It is an objective work done for the people. We are made fit for God’s family and we are able to live now and forever in God’s holy presence only because of what Jesus Christ did for us and what he is now doing for us, without our help or participation. While you go about your business every day, Jesus lives in the very presence of God, presenting to him his shed blood, in the true tabernacle, in heaven itself on our behalf. You do nothing to maintain your acceptance by God. Christ does everything for all who simply believe that he does everything. You are made a part of the people of God by his work alone which is cause for great rejoicing.

III. We regulate our private lives as members of his people

What this description of the religious calendar of Israel tells us, indeed what the whole law communicates is that the most important identifying characteristic of every individual Israelite and every Israelite family was that they were members of the people of God. Their entire lives were regulated by these religious observances. The most important thing, the best thing for every Jewish person was that they belonged to the people of God. They were part of God’s chosen, redeemed people. The corporate worship of God was at the heart of their lives, not on the periphery because belonging to God’s people was such an amazing fact. All of these rituals and holy days were designed in part to remind the people of the best news they had ever received, that God was their God and they were his people. Nothing compares to that reality.

So let me say to all who feel like outsiders, who don’t feel loved or accepted or appreciated by your family or a group of friends. If you are a believer in Christ, you have the only membership that matters. If you have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ so that you are now a citizen in God’s kingdom, a member of his family, then you are part of the most important group in the whole world. You can rejoice in that reality which does not in any way depend upon your effort or how you feel. Let me also say to those of you who feel accepted and loved and warmly welcomed by your family or your friends. Do not make the mistake of preferring membership in some merely human association over association with God’s family. Do not make the mistake of assuming that because you don’t feel like an outsider on the human level that you must be part of God’s family. Do not organize your life around your favorite human associations, rather prefer membership in the church of Jesus over membership in your family or friends or your country. Is this not what Jesus means when he says in Matthew 10:37, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me?” The best thing that can ever happen to any one of us is for God to adopt us into his family through Christ. When we have been made members of his family, then that identity becomes the most important thing about us and it is to be reflected in how we live our lives every moment of every day.

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