

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD PRODUCES PEOPLE PASSIONATE FOR GOD Numbers 6:1-21

INTRODUCTION

Sitting among us this morning there are men and women, boys and girls who spend hours every day playing video games. Many will forgo food and sleep and interaction with real human beings in order to play. Also sitting among us this morning are men and women, boys and girls who spend hours of every day playing musical instruments. They will miss meals and sleep and have little interaction with other human beings in order to play their instruments. Also sitting among us this morning are men and women, boys and girls who spend hours each day working in paid jobs or going to school or caring for children and homes. They will often go without sleep and food and recreation in order to pursue their work. In each of these groups of people their pursuit of one thing necessarily requires that they do not spend time doing other important and/or pleasurable things. Why do people live like this? Why do people deny themselves the necessities and pleasures of life in order to engage in particular activities?

People live like this because people are living by faith. Each of these people are doing what they do because they believe these activities will lead to greater happiness than not doing these activities in order to eat or sleep or do other things. They believe the promise of pleasure, of happiness held out by video games or skilled playing of a musical instrument or work. As Blaise Pascal, the famous French philosopher said, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man..."

The reason I draw your attention to this reality is because the description of the Nazarite vow in Numbers 6 raises the question of motivation. A man or a woman Israelite would voluntarily promise God he or she would not drink any wine or beer and eat no products from the grapevine and would not cut his or her hair and would avoid contact with dead bodies and not participate in any funerals for some period of time. Why would anyone do this? In making this vow you are separating yourself from legitimate pleasures and activities for some reason. What is that reason? The reason is given at the end of v. 2: the man or woman takes this vow to separate himself or herself "to the Lord." Or as v. 8 says, "All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord." In other words the ordinary Israelite person believes that God himself is a better source of joy than partaking of alcoholic drink or vinegar or grapes or raisins or any other thing associated with viticulture. He or she believes God is better than having stylish haircuts. He or she believes that God is better than being part of the funeral and the community of grief when a loved one dies.

The motive for this weird, voluntary behavior is described scores of times in the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 27:4-9 David, who is a lay person like those who take the Nazarite vow and not a priest says, "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.... I will sing and make melody to the LORD. Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me! You have said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, 'Your face, LORD, do I seek.'" Or again in Psalm 43:3-4, "Send forth your light and truth, let them guide me, let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell. Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my joy and my delight." God himself is the chief desire of David and thus he wants to be near to God, to know him, enjoy him, love him, and depend upon him.

This is not only an OT idea. Jesus tells us that the reason to be a Christian is because you believe that obtaining eternal life with him is infinitely better than having every pleasure this world offers. Paul says that he considers every accomplishment and pleasure of this world like a pile of dung in comparison to being forgiven and counted righteous by God through his faith in Jesus. Every person who is trusting in Jesus for salvation denies

himself or herself many legitimate pleasures in order to be near him and to be like him. This is what we are witnessing in this strange vow that ordinary Israelites would voluntarily make.

MAIN POINT

Christians will pay any cost to be near Jesus and to be like Jesus therefore...

I. Christians gladly follow their crucified Savior (vv. 1-8, 21)

As far as I've been able to determine this vow is not directly referred to in the NT except perhaps the apostle Paul may have taken this vow as recorded in Acts 18:18. Frankly as I began my study here I was having a hard time seeing how this had anything to do with us or with Jesus. However, as I followed a few of the key words from the text and as I compared the rituals associated with this vow with other rituals in the law I discovered that the Nazarite vow made a regular layperson in Israel holy like a priest. The ritual behaviors of the lay person who takes this vow are designed to make them like the priest. Thus every lay person, both male and female, could take on a temporary way of life that set him or her apart to the Lord in a way that was like the ways in which the priests were set apart and yet the Nazarite was not a priest.

Here are the ways that the Nazarite vow puts a lay person into the same state of holiness or "set apartness" to the Lord as a priest. The first requirement to be a Nazarite was they could not drink wine or beer or vinegar that came from either; also they could not consume any product that came from the grapevine; not grape juice, not fresh grapes, not raisins, not even the seeds or the skins. Now God instructs the priests in Leviticus 10:9, "Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations." The priests are the only other people in Israel who are commanded to suspend drinking wine or beer temporarily, when they are serving in the tabernacle. Thus, the Nazarite is like a priest in his or her abstaining from wine and beer temporarily, for the length of his vow. The extra prohibition from consuming even vinegar or any other product from the grapevine simply makes the separation of the Nazarite from the pleasures of the grape more emphatic. The individual and his friends and family are continually reminded of his holy condition because he is unable to partake of numerous food and drink items which every other Israelite is consuming. He is being like the priest who is serving in the tent of meeting in abstaining from this food and drink.

The second requirement is that the Nazarite cannot shave or cut any hair upon his or her head. Thus both men and women would end up with very long hair and the men with very bushy beards. Their hair would set them apart and identify them as Nazarites all the time. The same root word is used for Nazarite and for the verb "to separate, to consecrate" and for the noun, "consecration" throughout this passage. This same root is used for the golden plate that is put on the turban that the high priest wears and which is inscribed with the words, "Holy to the Lord." Exodus 39:30 says, "They made the plate of the holy consecration of pure gold, and wrote on it an inscription, like the engraving of a signet, 'Holy to the LORD.'" The exact same noun form is used for the hair of the Nazarite; his hair is called his "consecration" just as the golden plate is called the "consecration" of the high priest. Thus, in exactly the same way that the golden plate on the turban of the high priest is the sign that the high priest is holy, that is, he is set apart to the Lord, so also the long hair of the male or female Nazarite is the sign he or she is set apart to the Lord, that is, holy.

The third prohibition for the Nazarite is that they cannot come in contact with a dead person, nor can they in any way show grief or participate in the funeral of a dead family member, no matter how closely related (v. 7). In Leviticus 21 the priests were forbidden from coming in contact with the dead and from grieving the death of anyone except a close family member. However, the high priest could not mourn for any dead person, no matter how closely related. Thus again, the layperson by taking the Nazarite vow is acting, in this way like the chief priest and thus exhibiting the fact that he is holy to the Lord like the high priest. There are several other ways these rituals connect the Nazarite to the priest but for the sake of time I'm trusting that these three will convince you that this is indeed what is happening in this vow.

The only reason that a layperson would want to be in the same state as a priest is because the priest is the closest person to the Lord and he is, through the many rituals, the person who is most like God. He represents the Lord to the people and he is near to the Lord. So the layperson is demonstrating the passion of his or her heart to be near to the Lord and to be like the Lord just like the priest, especially the chief priest.

According to the NT the priests in the OT and especially the chief priest is a foreshadowing of Jesus. “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (Heb. 4:14).” “...and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:21-22).” When a believing Israelite saw the human priest they were seeing the shadow of the Messiah and they knew it. Thus they wanted to be like him because being like him meant that they were being close to the Lord and like the Lord. They expressed that desire in these ritualistic ways because these were the distinguishing marks of the priest. However, now that the true and real priest has come we do not seek to be like him by not drinking wine or beer or abstaining from all grape products or letting our hair grow long or not going to funerals. These things are not for us because the priests are not Jesus but only a symbol of Jesus. Let me be clear: not drinking wine or beer, not getting your hair cut and not going to funerals will not make you closer to God or like God in any way. These things are done away with because the reality to which they pointed is now here, since Jesus has come. If you or I did these things in order to be closer to the Lord we would be sinning.

The chief way that we are like Jesus is that just as he denied himself, he did not demand to be treated as God, he did not seek to find his life in the pleasures of sin and of this world but for the joy set before him he endured the cross in order to obtain the glory of sitting at the right hand of God, so we also refuse to find our life in the pleasures of sin and of this world but find our life to be in Christ. We live our lives as though living with God in the new heavens and the new earth is the chief thing and thus we gladly lose everything here in order that we may be found in Christ, not having a righteousness of our own that comes through the law but the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. We show that Jesus is our life, that he is everything to us as we set aside time to pray and read the Bible, as we join our families in Family Worship, as we come to church on Sunday morning to worship God, as we don't demand that our wife make dinner for us but we make dinner for her, as we don't repay the insult from a co-worker with an insult but we seek to do them good, as we disconnect the internet in order that we might not look at pornography, as we give up a night's sleep in order to love the men who are in the men's homeless shelter, as we do the dishes without complaining when mom asks us to do so. We aim to draw near to and be like our priest whose glory is in his willingly suffering and dying for our sins. So we also, by faith, die to our demand to have life go our way and we seek to live, by faith, as if being with Jesus is better than everything.

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- *Christians gladly follow their crucified Savior*
- *And therefore...*

II. Christians follow Jesus to show Jesus to others (vv. 1-8)

I mentioned that while the Nazarites are like the priests in their abstaining from these three things, yet they are not priests. The first way they are not like the priests is that they do not live in front of the tabernacle. They do not perform the priestly duties associated with the tabernacle. In other words, while being set apart like a priest they still live and work among the people. They are still part of the community of Israel. They maintain their life of separation from these things in the midst of the community. They still live in their tents with their families and according to their tribes. They still do the same work they did before and are involved in the same social circles as before. They live like regular folks, not like priests, except for these three particular ways. While the priests do their work in the tabernacle; these priest-like volunteers do their work out in the world. They are priests at work in the daily tasks of living, serving God by their work, just as the priests are serving the Lord by their work in the tabernacle.

Why does God want Israel to know about this voluntary vow at this time? Other than giving ordinary Israelites a means for expressing their devotion to the Lord is there any other reason for why he wants these set apart Israelites to be living throughout the community and not isolated from the people in the priestly tents? They are quite clearly set among the Israelites as a reminder and an example of the fact that God has called the entire nation of Israel to be for him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” as he says in Exodus 19:6. They are an example to all Israelites that God wants them to be set apart to him and in all they do to serve and honor and glorify him.

There is only one person in the entire OT who we know for sure was a Nazarite and that is Samson, whose story is told in Judges 13-16. He is unique in that he is a Nazarite from birth by God’s will. He doesn’t choose to be a Nazarite but is chosen to be a Nazarite by the Lord. The story of Judges is the story of the disintegration of Israel. It records how Israel went from the people of God led by Joshua in conquest of the land to a wicked group that almost annihilates one of its own tribes. Samson is the twelfth and final judge in this tragic story. His story is the most tragic of all the judges. In the structure of the book of Judges, Samson’s story is clearly set forth as the story of Israel. He is a Nazarite, a priest-like holy person set apart to God from birth, just like the nation itself. He defiles himself in God’s eyes by drinking wine, touching the dead and finally, letting his hair be shaved. The result is that God subjects him to the power of his enemies, just as he subjects disobedient and defiled Israel to the power of its enemies. The tragic story of the Nazarite Samson is the tragic story of the nation which, like the Nazarite is set apart to God, holy to the Lord. The point for our purpose is that God uses a Nazarite to exemplify his people thus showing that he aims for his people to be a “kingdom of priests, set apart as holy,” like the Nazarite. Thus the Nazarites are sprinkled among the people of Israel to bear witness to what God wants all of his people to be.

The NT explains that Christians are set among the nations of the world for the purpose of showing the nations that to know Jesus and to be like Jesus is the point of life. We, like the Nazarites, do not live in cloisters or Christian ghettos or separated from the world. We live in the midst of the world, doing our work as individuals who are like our high priest so that others will come and follow Jesus with us. Jesus says in Matthew 28:19-20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2:12, “Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.” As the Nazarites were set among the people of Israel as those who were like the priests in order to call all Israelites to desire God themselves, so we also are placed in this world as those like our high priest Jesus in order to call our families and neighbors and co-workers to come and follow Jesus as we have.

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III. Christians depend on Jesus’ work, not their efforts (vv. 9-21)

A second way that the Nazarites are not like the priests is seen in vv. 9-21. First of all, in vv. 9-12 God explains what is to happen if a Nazarite inadvertently comes into contact with a dead person. What does the Nazarite do if he is out cutting wood with a neighbor and the neighbor drops dead of a heart attack? Look at v. 9. He becomes defiled and must undergo a ritual cleansing. First he is put out of the camp for 7 days. On the seventh day the Nazarite shaves his or her head. Then on the eighth day he or she must offer two doves or two pigeons to the priest at the door of the tabernacle; one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering. In so doing the priest atones for the sin of the Nazarite. Then he must begin his vow over again, signifying the do-over by offering a year old male lamb as a guilt offering. Thus we see that while the Nazarite is like the priest he cannot atone for his own sins. He needs the priest to intercede for him. He cannot be cleansed of his defilement without the priest offering the three basic sacrifices for him, to make atonement for him. Thus, the vow and the

time already spent in abstaining cannot prevent becoming unclean and have no ability to make the person clean. The intercession of the priest and the offering of the sacrifices are the only way to be made clean.

We also must remember that our acts of past obedience cannot and do not prevent present disobedience. We all are always starting over because we regularly sin on purpose, not simply by accident. We regularly must come to the Lord, confessing our sins and trusting once again in the forgiveness and cleansing gained for us by our priest and sacrifice, Jesus. No matter how much we pursue Christ we daily recognize that we have failed to be like him in many ways and so we must daily confess our sins. We are always failures, made unclean by our daily sins. However, our failures never eliminate us from the possibility of pursuing Christ and seeking to live like him. We can always, every time, come to our priest and be cleansed by the blood of his sacrifice and continue to draw near to him and seek to live like him. It is the wonder of the gospel. His provision is always available so that we can always start over.

When the time of the Nazarite's vow comes to an end, he again has to submit to the ministry of the priest in order to end his set apart status to the Lord and to return to the normal life of a layperson in Israel (vv. 13-20). He has to offer a male lamb without blemish for a burnt offering, an unblemished female lamb for a sin offering and a ram for a peace offering together with all the bread and grain and drink offerings prescribed in the law. He is not able to end the vow on his own. He needs to be represented by the priest and to offer the sacrifices in order for his period of consecration of being set apart to the Lord to be accepted. His abstaining from the three things proscribed in vv. 1-8 would not be accepted by the Lord apart from the offerings and representation of the priest. Do not miss this very important and critical fact, the priest-like behavior of the Nazarite was completely unacceptable and worthless in God's sight without the work of the priest and the offering of the sacrifices.

How easy it is for Christians in their eager desire to be near to Jesus and to be like Jesus to forget that our best efforts at living holy lives never make us acceptable to God. Now and forever we are always dependent upon the work of our high priest and lamb, Jesus Christ. Listen to how Peter puts these two things together in 1 Peter 2:4-5, "As you come to him, the Living Stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him; you also, like living stones are being built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." Our work, our spiritual sacrifices as priest-like people is always and only acceptable to God because of Jesus, our great high priest. God loves us and accepts us and will reward us with heaven not because of who we are or what we do but because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

Friend, do you believe that being near and being like Jesus is the best and highest good you could attain? If you answer that question yes, then I have another question for you: how are you showing this faith in Jesus? What are the ways that your love for Christ is manifesting itself? Finally, are you resting in and rejoicing in the finished work of your high priest Jesus or do you think that God's acceptance of you depends upon your performance? When you fail are you returning to your priest and experiencing the forgiveness and cleansing obtained through his blood and so beginning over again? Do you daily confess your sins and return to Christ as the only reason God loves you and accepts you?

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- *Christians depend on Jesus' work, not their own*

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