

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD CREATES A RESPONSIVE PEOPLE

Numbers 7:1-8:26

INTRODUCTION

The “flashback” is a very common technique in the stories we watch and read. Authors and screenwriters use this method of story-telling in order to give us important information that will help us understand something that is happening in the story line. The movie “Fellowship of the Ring” begins with a flashback in order to tell us about the ring of power and how it came into the possession of the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins whose 111th birthday party is the actual beginning of the story. Without the flashback the story that begins with his birthday party would make no sense.

Numbers 7-10:10 is just such a flashback. This passage recounts events that occurred prior to the events recorded in Numbers 1-6. In Exodus 40 we are told how Moses set up the tabernacle on the first day of the first month at the beginning of the second year after Israel came out of Egypt. In Numbers 1:1 we are told that God told Moses to take a census of Israel on the first day of the second month of the second year since Israel came out of Egypt. Thus the events recorded in Numbers 1-6 took place 30 days after Moses set up the tabernacle. Now notice in 7:1 that we are taken back 30 days to that first day of the first month of the second year when Moses set up the tabernacle. Then look at chapter 9:1-2 we are told that all Israel celebrated the Passover on the 14th day of the first month of the second year. Again, another event that took place between Exodus 40 and Numbers 1. Finally, look over at 10:11-12, on the 20th day of the second month of the second year Israel set out from Mt. Sinai. So Israel sets out on its march across the wilderness 50 days after Moses sets up the tabernacle. If you were going to tell the story in strictly chronological order the events of Numbers 7-10:10 would have been placed at the end of Exodus, after chapter 40 or placed within Leviticus and then Numbers 6 would have been followed by Numbers 10:11 and following.

If we are going to understand and be helped by God’s word to us in these chapters we must answer this question: Why did God want this flashback placed at this point in the story? The short answer is that these chapters emphasize the effects of grace upon his people. We have seen how the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the cleansing rituals are all an expression of God’s unmerited favor. The creator God who is holy and just has made a way for him to live with sinful men through this elaborate system of rituals and sacrifices. They all prefigure the person and work of Jesus Christ whose life, death and resurrection obtain forgiveness of sins and eternal life with God and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives now. As we saw last week in the daily blessing of the priests, the crucified and resurrected and ascended Jesus blesses all of his people with God’s gracious salvation. Thus, the placement of these chapters shows us the effects of, the necessary responses to God’s gracious salvation. This is a common and often repeated theme of the Bible.

God saves his people by grace not by works. Salvation is a free gift that God gives to people not because of who we are or what we do but because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. We receive that gift by faith, not by prayer; not by a decision; not by coming to church; not by commitment to God but by faith. Faith is not a work. Faith has no power of its own, it doesn’t do anything. Faith is simply relying upon someone else to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. What the Bible teaches, and this is an example of that teaching, is that everyone who is saved by God’s grace through faith works. God’s grace always changes people. No one is saved by works but everyone who is saved does God’s good works. In our passage this morning we are going to see four of the effects of, the responses to God’s graciously granting his people salvation.

MAIN POINT

God graciously saves his people so that they all respond...

I. With cheerful generosity (v. 7:1-88)

As near as I can figure Numbers 7 is the second longest chapter in the Bible, about half the length of Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible. As the second longest chapter it is the most tedious chapter in the Bible. It is a highly repetitious account of what each of the 12 tribes of Israel under the leadership of their chiefs, gave to the Lord, to the priests over a twelve day period, beginning with the day Moses first set up the tabernacle. Verses 2-11 tell how the tribal leaders supplied 6 carts and 12 oxen to the Levites belonging to the clans of Gershon and Merari. These were the men who were responsible for carrying the tents, curtains and frames used in the tabernacle when Israel left Mt. Sinai and traveled across the desert to the land of Canaan. Then, beginning in v. 12 and going on through v. 83 we are told what each of the tribal leaders contributed on the occasion of the dedication of the altar. Every tribe contributed exactly the same thing: one large silver plate heaped with a grain offering, one large silver bowl full of a grain offering, a small dish made of gold with incense upon it, a bull, ram and year old male lamb for a burnt offering, a male goat for a sin offering and two ox, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old, all for a peace or fellowship offering.

We modern readers of this mind-numbing list cannot understand why the writer didn't just explain what the first leader, Nahshon, son of Amminidab of the tribe of Judah gave and then say, all the other guys gave exactly the same and then write vv. 84-89 which summarizes the totals, 12 plates, 12 bowls, 12 dishes and then all the animals. I could have cut out 65 verses and thus saved a lot of parchment space in which we could have written some far more interesting stories. Why such a careful accounting of what each and every tribe did when they all did exactly the same thing?

The point is that all the people of Israel contributed to the work of the priests and the tabernacle. All the people generously and in an organized fashion contributed to the functioning of the tabernacle. This regular, generous giving is one of the responses of the people to the fact of God's gracious provision for their sins through the work of the priests in the tabernacle. These gifts are given in response to God's putting his name on them and blessing them as the last verse of chapter 6 says. These gifts are given by faith. They show that the people are trusting that through the work of the priests at the tabernacle, God will live with them and bless them. They give in response to God's presence and so that the ministry which mediates God presence may continue.

The church does not have priests or altars or animal sacrifices or a tabernacle anymore. The church is the people. We are God's temple, God's dwelling place on earth. As Paul says in Ephesians 2:19-22, "...you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit." In addition, pastors and elders are called God's ministers, God's builders who build the church by teaching and counseling his word (1 Cor. 3). The NT calls the people of God to financially support this work of teaching the gospel by giving to the local church. Our generous financial giving to our local church is a response to God's grace and expresses our desire to make sure the ministry of the word continues so that God's grace is spread and maintained through the gospel. Paul makes exactly this point in 1 Corinthians 9 where he argues that those who have received the grace of God through the preaching of the gospel should respond by supporting those in the church who deliver that gospel. He argues that we should be generous in our financial support of the work of the church because of the grace we have received from God through Christ, which is the same argument that is being made in Numbers.

We do not talk about giving very often at RHCC. One of the reasons is because we are convinced that when people understand and rejoice in the amazing grace of God in Christ, then they give generously. Therefore we spend most of our time talking about the glory of God's grace given to us in Christ. We have seen God abundantly supply our needs over the past 13 years we have existed as a church because of this reality. However I am going to talk about our current financial situation now because this is the point of the text we are considering this morning. Clearly the Israelites knew what was needed for the work of the tabernacle as their uniform gifts show and so I want to make sure we all know what our needs are as a church at this present time. In 2009 we spent, as a church, \$330,134. This year we have set a budget of \$342,612 plus we've committed to

spend at least an additional \$60,000 to finish our offices and put in a lift and remodel the foyer plus we are sending a team to Mongolia to help Tom and Lynn Suchy, our missionaries and the Root of Blessing Church, our sister church in their church planting efforts in northern Mongolia which will require about \$25,000. We have the cash we need to finish the offices and lift because of how abundantly God has provided for us over the past 13 years. However, our giving is currently running behind our expenses and in view of the commitments we have made as a congregation this year we need for all of us to increase our giving. Each of us that considers RHCC our church home needs to carefully evaluate if we are adequately responding to the gracious work of God on our behalf by regularly, cheerfully and generously giving to God's work in and through our local church for this is one of the effects of God's grace upon our lives.

God graciously saves his people so that they all respond...

- *With cheerful generosity*
- *And...*

II. With faithful listening to God's word (v. 7:89-8:4)

Prior to verse 89 of Numbers 7 God spoke to Moses either on top of Mt. Sinai or in the temporary tent of meeting that he had set up outside the camp. But beginning on the 13th day of the first month of the second year after Israel left Egypt, God began to speak to Moses from within the Most Holy place, from above the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant, between the cherubim. This verse is the fulfillment of a promise God made in Exodus 25:22 in the midst of God's instructions on how to build the Ark of the Covenant. God says, "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." So when God comes to dwell in the midst of his people he comes, not as a silent, passive God but for the purpose of speaking to us. When you become a Christian, when you enter into a relationship with God you enter into a relationship with the best and greatest of all beings who has something he wants to say to you.

The fact that God has come to speak to us is also the point of the opening paragraph in chapter 8. Immediately after telling us that God speaks to Moses so he can tell them to Israel God gives instructions regarding the daily care of the lamp that sits on the north wall of the Holy place, the outer room of the tabernacle. The lamp is outside the curtain behind which is the Ark of the Covenant where God speaks from as referred to in v. 89. The lamp is a highly stylized tree made of gold that is reminiscent of the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. There are seven lamps on its branches. The emphasis in the instructions given to Aaron regarding the lamps is to make sure that the light falls in front of the lamp, which in the arrangement within the Holy Place means that the light will fall upon the 12 loaves of bread which are weekly placed on the table opposite the lamp on the south wall. Those loaves represent Israel. Thus part of the symbolism of the lamp and show bread in the outer room, the Holy Place shows that God by his word shines his light that gives life upon the people of God as Moses delivers that word to the people.

The word of God is regularly connected to God's life and light. In Deuteronomy 32:47 God says about his word, "For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess." 1 Peter 1:23-25 says, "...you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God... And this word is the good news that was preached to you." The word of God is our life and it is by the word of God that we are given God's life. It is by this word that our spiritual life is sustained. In addition Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Psalm 119:130 says, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple." God's word is his light to show us the way through this dark world into his heavenly kingdom.

The God who has become our Father through the person and work of Jesus has something he wants to say to us. He has brought us to himself by telling us the truth about ourselves and about his son and now that we are in a relationship to him he has things he wants to say to us. The primary job of the church, according to Jesus, is to

teach his disciples to obey everything he has commanded. Paul instructs Timothy, the pastor of a local church to preach the word in season and out of season. James warns us not to merely listen to the word but to do what it says. Thus, one of the chief effects of God's grace upon us is that we are people who pay attention to what God says in and through his written word so that we can believe all that it says and obey all that it commands. Christians are people who practice active listening to God as he speaks to us in and through his written word. God has not come to live with us so that we can tell him what to do but he has come to live with us so that he can tell us what he has done for us in Christ and then how we should live here and now because of what he has done for us in Christ.

If you claim to be a Christian then you must be a person who is actively and aggressively seeking to understand what God is saying to his church in this written word. It makes as much sense to say "I have been saved by Jesus but I give no attention to reading the Bible and I am bored by sermons and talk about the Bible" as for a newly married husband to say, "I have no interest in getting to know my wife. I have no interest in listening to what she has to say. I don't want to know her or what she likes and what she doesn't like." People who say they are Christians but who are not eagerly seeking to understand what God says in his word are fooling themselves. God makes you a Christian by his word and he makes you a better Christian by his word. So you must give time to listening to what he says in this word by personal reading and study, in Family Worship, by gathering on Sunday mornings to hear God speak through the preaching of his word and in interaction with other believers in small groups and one to one.

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III. With daily faith in Christ (8:5-19)

Beginning in 8:5 we are told how the Levites were cleansed and prepared to do the work of assisting the priests by guarding the tabernacle and by carrying the tent and articles of worship. This cleansing ritual was carried out during the first month after the tabernacle was set up and before they were counted and arranged around the camp. The main thing that is emphasized in this ordination ceremony is that the Levites perform their work in place of all the other Israelites. Look at vv. 9-11. The entire congregation of the Israelites lay their hands upon all the male Levites 25-50 years of age. This is exactly the same action that is done with all the animal sacrifices. The symbolism in regard to animal sacrifices is that the animal is killed in place of the person who places their hand on its head. The animal substitutes its life for the person's life. This act shows that the Levites are now the substitute sacrifice for the people. This is clearly seen in v. 11 where we are told that Aaron offers all the Levites as a "wave offering." They are given to God in place of the Israelites. However, they are not killed. They substitute for the Israelites by serving God at the tabernacle, not by dying for the Israelites. If you look over at v. 19 you will see that when the Levites serve at the tabernacle by guarding it and by carrying the tent through the desert they are "making atonement" for all Israel. This word "make atonement" is used on every other occasion in the Law of Moses in reference to the death of an animal which makes atonement. However, here, it is the service of the Levites which makes atonement. Remember, atonement means that God's just anger against human sin is satisfied. The penalty for sin is paid when atonement takes place.

In the NT, most often it is the death of Jesus that is said to "make atonement" for our sins. The just penalty for our sin is death and so when Jesus dies he satisfies God's just anger against us, he makes atonement for our sins. However, the NT also says it is not only the death of Jesus that is necessary for our salvation. In Romans 5:19 Paul compares the disobedience of Adam to the obedience of Jesus by saying, "For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Or again in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Not only are our sins pardoned by the death of Christ but we are counted

righteous because of the obedience of Christ. Jesus not only died in our place but he also loved God and loved his neighbor in our place. His “active obedience” to God’s law is now credited to us who believe. He, like the Levites in relation to Israel, served God in our place so that God accepts us as if we always served him because Jesus, our substitute always served him.

Therefore, just as the Israelites depended upon the Levites to serve God in the tabernacle in their place so that no plague came upon them (v. 19) so we trust Jesus to serve God in our place so that no plague comes upon us. We do not die for our lack of service to God but gain life because God accepts Jesus’ service in our place. We daily depend upon the obedient life of Jesus in our place to have made us righteous in God’s sight. We do not depend upon our obedience which is never a perfect obedience but, like the Israelites depending on the daily work of the Levites we daily depend upon the perfect obedience of Jesus.

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IV. With service to God for the good of others (8:14-15, 19 & 26)

This act of Aaron the priest treating the Levites as an offering made to God is used by Paul as he describes his ministry of preaching the gospel. Listen to how he describes himself in Romans 15:15-17 and see if you do not hear the echo of Numbers 8, “... because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” Paul views himself to be acting like a priest when he preaches the gospel. By that word he makes human beings into a sanctified sacrifice to God. Just like Aaron made the Levites fit for service in the tabernacle by the ritual cleansing and the offering of animals so Paul makes us fit for serving God by proclaiming that Jesus lived and died and rose again so that all who believe are cleansed of their sins and set apart to God. All who believe the gospel preached belong to God and serve God, like the Levites.

Earlier in Romans, in chapter 12, Paul uses this same ritual from Numbers to describe who we are as Christians. Again, listen to what he says, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” In response to God’s mercy given to us in Christ we are to view ourselves as living sacrifices. The Levites are the only living sacrifices in the OT, thus Paul has in mind here that we, like the Levites are to use our bodies, our time to serve God. In Romans 12 Paul goes on to say that the way we act like holy, living sacrifices is by using the gifts God has given us to serve one another. We serve the church, the temple of God, the people of God as living sacrifices in the same way the Levites served their fellow Israelites by serving God in the tent.

Christians are made into sanctified, living sacrifices through the gospel of Christ so that we serve God by serving each other for the purpose of building up the church, which is the temple of God. We serve one another both through our pursuing relationships with one another and through involvement in the organized work of the church. All of us are to be involved in paying attention to the other believers around us and to be looking for ways to encourage and help one another spiritually, emotionally and physically. And all of us are to be cheerfully volunteering to help in the organized ministries of the church. We all need to serve on Sunday mornings by greeting people and ushering and watching children and making coffee and cleaning up and leading worship and working at the info table and the library. Mindy Collins, our Welcome Team coordinator is looking for someone to be in charge of the nursery. Right now Fred Fisher, our Facility Team Coordinator needs people to help with weekly cleaning of the church and weekly lawn mowing. Kay Meyer needs help with the duffle bag project and with our work with Love, Inc. Each of our Ministry Team Coordinators needs help. If you consider RHCC your church home you should make it your business to talk with our ministry

coordinators and to ask them what they need help doing. When Christ saves you he makes you into a living sacrifice, holy to God and you respond by serving other believers in and through your local church. I'm not trying to shame you into working in and for the church. I'm trying to tell you what the Scripture clearly says: if you are a person who has been made into an acceptable offering to God through Christ, then you are a person who offers his or her body as that living sacrifice to God by serving other believers in and through this local church. I'm asking you to respond to the grace of God by doing what you were made to do, serve God by serving God's people in this local church.

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