

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES REMEMBERING AND RESPONDING

Numbers 9:1-23

INTRODUCTION

Almost every summer for 20 years Jane and I, along with our children, would leave our home and go to live in Ft. Collins, CO for the summer where I was part of the administrative team that coordinated Campus Crusade for Christ's Institute of Biblical Studies and National Staff Training. It took a lot of time and effort to make sure that everything at home would be taken care of while we were gone and that we would have everything we needed to travel the 1200 miles to and then live in CO for 12 weeks and then return home. The end goal of all of our planning and preparation was to return to our permanent home safely. We enjoyed our traveling and we enjoyed staying in CO but we didn't live in hotels or in the apartment we rented in CO the same way we lived in our permanent home. Everything we did for those 12 weeks was done in view of the fact that we were going home, that this was not our permanent residence or way of life.

From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus continually told the people to whom he preached the gospel that there was another world coming for which they should prepare. While the kingdom of heaven came near in the person of the king, yet the fullness of that kingdom was in the future and now he said was the time to prepare for its coming. Whether he was talking about how we use our money or how we relate to others or how we handle suffering and disappointment or how we pray, he continually connected our present experience to that final day. All of his parables revolve around this basic fact, one day the true reality, the kingdom of God is coming to this earth, therefore right now you and I are to be living in light of that future reality.

The fact that we are to live as if this world is not our home but we are traveling through it to our permanent home is a major theme in the writings of Jesus' chief spokespersons, the apostles. Paul writes, "...our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a Savior from there, our Lord Jesus Christ." He prays for Christians, "May the Lord strengthen your heart so that you will be blameless and pure in the presence of our God and Father when the Lord Jesus returns..." The NT writers regularly refer to the story of Israel coming out of Egypt and traveling through the wilderness to the Promised Land as a symbol of God's saving us through Christ out of our slavery to sin and then bringing us through this life to his eternal kingdom. So as we consider this story in Numbers that happened thousands of years ago to a people who lived as differently from us as you can imagine we are looking at ourselves. Their story is our story and so if we will pay attention to it we can be helped immensely as we travel through this wilderness world to God's heavenly kingdom.

We saw three weeks ago as we examined chapters 7 & 8 that all the material from 7:1 through 10:10 happened prior to the events recorded in chapters 1-6. We recognized that the reason the author recorded the story in this none chronological manner was to emphasize the effects of God's gracious salvation upon them. God rescuing them from Egypt and then setting up the tabernacle and priesthood and sacrifices and cleanliness laws are a foreshadowing of God's saving his people by his unmerited favor, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Israel did not do anything to become the people of God, to gain freedom from the Egyptians, to be encamped in front of Mt. Sinai as the recipients of the law. God did everything according to his own purpose and grace. In chapters 7 & 8 we saw that the effects of God's saving grace were generosity, listening to God's word, dependence on Christ to serve God in our place and serving one another in love. In chapter 9, just prior to Israel leaving Mt. Sinai and setting out across the desert God reminds them of how they are to live in his grace so that they make it safely into the Promised Land. This chapter reminds us of how we are to live now in this wilderness world so that we make it safely into heaven.

MAIN POINT

We will only make it safely to heaven, our permanent home by...

I. Remembering who Jesus is and what he has done for us (vv. 1-14)

Exactly one year prior to v. 1 the Lord had the same conversation with Moses that he has right now only with more details. That conversation is recorded in Exodus 12. Following Moses' last meeting with Pharaoh and at least five days before the night of Passover he told Moses that he wanted every household in Israel to find a year old, male, unblemished lamb to bring home to live with them on the 10th day of the month. Then he told them on the 14th day of that month, at twilight they were to kill those lambs and spread their blood over and alongside the doors of their homes. They were to roast and eat the lamb with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Any leftovers from the meal were to be burned up before morning. They were to make sure that the bones of the lamb were not broken. They were to eat it dressed for travel, with their walking sticks in their hands. Also, during that conversation one year ago the Lord told Moses that this was not going to be a onetime meal but that every year forever they were going to eat this meal. It was to be a memorial meal of the night that God passed over the homes covered in the blood of the lamb and thus did not kill the firstborn sons in those homes. It was to remember the night that the Lord did kill the firstborn sons of every home where there was no blood over the door, whether they were Egyptian or Jewish homes. It was the last night they were slaves. On the morning after this meal, they were free people, traveling across the wilderness to the Land of Promise.

In addition to the rules concerning this lamb and this meal, the Lord also, in Exodus 12, gave instructions regarding the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Beginning with that meal on the 14th day the people were to eat nothing with leaven (yeast) in it for seven days. Thus Israel was to remember that they left in haste from Egypt and did not have time to bake bread with yeast in it. According to Leviticus 23:4-8, in addition to this private meal that every household was to have, there was also to be a sacrifice made at the tabernacle every day for seven days. On the 14th day and on the 21st day the whole community was to gather at the tabernacle to participate in the ritual offerings. Thus the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread were both a private, family based memorial service and a public memorial service.

The original instructions about Passover included what the Lord tells Moses here in vv. 13 & 14. In v. 13, if anyone that is able to eat the Passover does not eat it, that person will be cut off from God's people, which means that they will be killed by the Lord in some unspecified fashion. In the first Passover not participating would mean that your firstborn son would be killed and on every occasion afterwards if you did not participate you would be subject to the same fate. In v. 14 the Lord reminds Moses that every circumcised sojourner, that is, a Gentile who has come to live among Israel and has submitted to the Jewish religion is also to eat the Passover.

In Numbers 9 one additional rule is added to the celebration of Passover. There were a group of men who had been made unclean through coming into contact with a dead body. They knew that the Lord commanded that everyone participate in the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. Yet, they also knew that if you had contact with a dead body you had to stay outside the camp for seven days before you could re-enter. During that time you could not have any contact with anyone or anything inside the camp of Israel or you would die. In other words, these men were on the horns of a dilemma. If they didn't eat the Passover they would die and if they did eat the Passover they would die. So they come to Moses and ask what they should do. Moses goes into the tabernacle to ask the Lord what should be done. God explains that those who are unable to eat the Passover on the 14th day of the first month either because they are unclean and thus cannot enter the camp or because they are on a journey and thus outside the camp will be able to eat the Passover on the fourteenth day of the 2nd month and celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for those seven days in the second month. Those celebrating Passover in the second month are to do it exactly the way God says. The main emphasis here in Numbers 9 is that everyone is to participate in exact accordance with the regulations the Lord stipulated to Moses just before he delivered Israel from Egypt. Celebrating Passover every year is mandatory for everyone.

Let me draw your attention to just a few of the ways the NT ties Christ and his church to the Passover and Israel. First, you will remember that the night before Jesus was crucified he instituted a memorial meal, what we call communion, for all his people to celebrate until he comes again. In fact, he and his disciples were eating the Passover meal on the evening of the fourteenth day of the first month of the Jewish calendar when he

said, “This is my body, broken for you.” “This is the blood of the new covenant shed for you.” Just like Moses commanding Israel right before God delivers them from their slavery to remember God’s deliverance from Egypt in the Passover meal, Jesus commands his church to remember his deliverance by eating the communion meal. What Jesus did during the last Passover meal he ate with his disciples was an intentional reenactment of what God told Moses to do in Exodus 12 and Numbers 9.

Second, John’s gospel begins and ends with identifying Jesus with this Passover lamb. In John 1:29, the apostle records John the Baptist calling Jesus, “The Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” This is a clear reference to Jesus as the Passover lamb. Then in John 19:31-37 the apostle tells how the Roman soldiers, in order to hasten death went to the two criminals on each side of Jesus and broke their legs but when they came to Jesus they found he was already dead and thus they did not break his legs. Rather they pierced his side with a spear. Then John adds this editorial comment in v. 36: “For these things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled: ‘Not one of his bones will be broken.’” This is an almost exact quote in the Greek of Numbers 9:12. Thus, one of the ways the apostle John describes Jesus in his gospel is as the Passover Lamb. His shed blood protects all those who take refuge under his blood from God’s wrath.

Third, Paul says this in 1 Cor. 5:7-8, “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” Thus Paul identifies Christ directly with the Passover lamb that has delivered us from God’s wrath. He goes on to identify the yeast with sin and shows that just as Israel had to be a community without any yeast so we are to be a community without any flagrant sin in our midst. Fourth, Peter in 1 Peter 2:19 uses the exact same language to describe Christ that God used to describe the Pascal lamb in Exodus. Jesus is a lamb without blemish or defect whose death secures our redemption, the same phrase used to describe the Passover lamb.

The main thing to notice about this Passover sacrifice and meal is why God calls it the Passover. God went throughout Egypt and struck down the firstborn son of every Egyptian household during the night but passed over every home with blood over it. Presumably, God knew who the Egyptians were and who were the Israelites. He didn’t need any help figuring out which homes to strike and which ones to spare. He distinguished between Israel and Egypt in the other nine plagues. Yet in the last plague he required every Israelite home to keep a lamb for 4 days, kill it on the evening of the 14th day, spread some of its blood on the door frames of their homes, cook the lamb whole and then eat it together along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, ready to leave at a moment’s notice. Why does he do this? Why not just kill the Egyptians and spare the Israelites?

First, by requiring the death of this year old, male, unblemished lamb God shows that the reason he is sparing Israel’s firstborn sons is not because Israel is somehow more deserving than the Egyptians. Every home in Egypt, including every Jewish home, deserves to have the firstborn sons in it killed. It would be perfectly just for God to kill the firstborn sons of Israel along with those of Egypt. What distinguishes Israel from Egypt is not that Israel is somehow less sinful and more holy than Egypt. What will distinguish each Israelite home that does as God says is the blood of the lamb on their doors. If there is no blood on the door, the firstborn son will justly die, even if the family is Jewish. Additionally, if any Egyptian home places blood over their door, their son will be spared; this is why Gentile sojourners are permitted to eat the Passover meal. Second, every home that lives with a lamb for 4 days and then kills it, spreads the blood and eats it is living by faith in the promise of God. There is no logical connection between a year old lamb and a firstborn son except that God himself said this was the condition for his sparing the Jewish homes. Every home that obeys God does so in faith, believing that the blood of the Lamb secures their salvation. Third, it is God who sees the blood covering the doors and so passes over those homes covered by the blood. God killed the sons out of his just anger with Egypt’s sins. Therefore, the blood of the lamb is the satisfaction of God’s just anger against the sin of the Israelites. He provides the lamb and he accepts the death of the lamb in place of their death. It is his work, beginning to end, none of it a work of man. The Israelites receive and get the benefit of what God has done by trusting in his promise.

The death of these lambs is what secured the salvation of Israel. It is this death that God wants Israel to remember forever. In the same way, it is the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, that is to be the center of our attention and affections, individually and as a church. This death has made us God's people. There would be no reason for us to be together this morning if it were not for the death of Jesus in our place. Every person sitting here deserves to die for his or her sins. Yet, God provided his very own Son to be the satisfaction of his wrath against our sin. When he sees the blood of his son, he passes over our sins. The person and the church that belongs to God regularly remember the death of Jesus for our sins. It is this death that we sing about and think about and pray about and talk about. We do not spend our time thinking about what we do but about what Christ has done. The daily work of the Christian and the weekly work of the church is to remember the death of Jesus for us. The only way to make it safely through this wilderness world into God's heavenly kingdom is to remember and rejoice in this death for our sins.

II. Responding daily to the leading of the Holy Spirit (vv. 15-23)

Numbers 9:15-23 is a highly stylized, repetitious description of the fact that God manifested his presence among Israel in the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, by having a cloud cover it which had the appearance of fire at night. Then throughout their wilderness journey whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent the Israelites packed up and followed the cloud across the desert. Then when the cloud stopped the people set up camp. Israel remained in camp as long as the cloud remained over the tabernacle, no matter how long or how short it remained. Eight times the text says that the lifting and settling of the cloud was "the command of the Lord." Thus, Israel "kept the charge of the Lord" by acting in accord with God's command through the cloud of his glory moving and stopping.

In John 1:14 we are told that the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." The word "dwelt" literally means, to tabernacle among" or "to pitch a tent." John 1:18 says "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known." The point that John is making in this prologue to his gospel is that just as the glory of God settled upon that tabernacle so God himself is fully revealed in the "tent" of Jesus' body. Just as the tabernacle and the glory of God were united and inseparable so also the physical body of Jesus and the glory of God are inseparable. If you were to ask while traveling with Israel, "where is God?" you would just point at the tabernacle covered by the cloud/fire. If you were to ask while Jesus was on the earth, "where is God?" you would just point at Jesus. Where Jesus went, his disciples followed while he was on this earth, just like Israel went wherever the cloud and the tabernacle went.

But now Jesus is not physically present. However, in John 14, the night before he was killed Jesus said this to his disciples: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." Thus Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is him coming to his people spiritually. The HS is the presence of both the Father and the Son who comes to dwell with us and in us. In other words, the glory of God that rested on the tabernacle and then on Jesus now rests upon us, the church and in each of us individually. Paul says both things in his two letters to the Corinthians. First, he says the whole church is God's temple and the HS dwells in us collectively in 1 Corinthians 3:16, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (The "you's" are plural.) Then in 2 Corinthians 6:19 he says each of us have the HS, "...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?"

The point I want to make is this: this cloud that leads the people of Israel through the wilderness is a physical symbol, a foreshadowing of the HS who leads us through the wilderness of this world to our heavenly home. Just as the Israelites were only safe when they followed that cloud and fire so we are only kept safe as we follow where the HS leads. This leading of the HS is not his leading us to our soul mate or a perfect job or to which stock to buy or where to live. Rather, Paul describes this leading of the HS in Romans 8:12-14 (please turn there, page 944). After he explains that the HS lives in each Christian he says, "So then, brothers, we are

debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Notice two things here. First, the only people who are sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit of God. This is exactly the situation for Israel. The only way you can be part of Israel is if you follow the cloud. If you don’t follow the cloud, you will be left behind; you will be outside the camp. You can only remain as part of Israel by following God as he leads through the cloud. In the same way, you are only a child of God if you follow the HS. Second, to be led by the Spirit is equivalent to this phrase, “by the Spirit putting to death the deeds of the body.” You are following the HS, just as Israel followed the cloud when, by the work of the HS you wage war against, put to death the ways in which sin is expressed through your body.

What does that mean? How exactly does that work? Look back at Romans 8:5, “...those who live according to the Spirit (that is Paul’s definition of a Christian) set their minds on the things of the Spirit.” Every Christian thinks about the things the HS thinks and cares about. What the HS cares about is Jesus, his person and his work. Therefore the way we put to death the deeds of the body that arise from our sinful nature is by setting our mind on the person and work of Jesus. As we give thought to him, the HS gives to us an appreciation of, a love for Jesus himself. We put sin to death by the power of a superior pleasure. The reason we sin is because it is pleasurable. Sin makes promises to us which we believe and act upon. The only way to kill our addiction to the pleasures of sin is to find superior pleasure in the person and work of Jesus. We do not naturally think that Jesus is anyone special. He does not naturally please us. However, the HS leads us to see and to savor the glory of Jesus. The HS leads us to Christ, to seeing and prizing him above all else. As the HS enables us to prefer Jesus to the pleasure of sin we stop doing the sin, we put it to death.

Everyone in this room knows how this works. There are many things that you used to enjoy doing which you no longer do because you are doing something else that you now enjoy more. Every person who has successfully altered their diet, eating better food and less of it, finds greater pleasure in being fit and healthy than in the pleasure of eating donuts or fast food. Many used to find great pleasure in watching TV but now watch little TV because of the superior pleasure they find in playing video games. Thus the way we put the deeds of our body which arise from sin to death is by filling our minds with the knowledge of Christ and his saving work and asking the HS to fill us with the joy of knowing Jesus so that pursuing Jesus and being like Jesus makes us happier than the sinful behaviors we used to enjoy. So we follow the HS as he leads us to Jesus and to the revelation of his glory so that sin loses its flavor because of the sweetness of Jesus; sin becomes ugly in comparison to the beauty of Jesus.

How do you break the pattern of resentment and grudge holding in your life? As you see and rejoice in the free forgiveness of Jesus for you, by the power of the HS, your resentment becomes ugly to you and you delight in loving and being kind to those who you perceive have harmed you just as Jesus loves you and is kind to you. How do you break the pattern of gossiping about others? As the HS enables you to feel the wonder of Jesus’ person and work and thus you delight to talk of him and not the behavior of others. As you learn to rest in the fact that Jesus is the judge and not you and thus you trust him to pass sentence in his own time and manner, you do not feel the need to pass judgment on your own. How do you break your pattern of anger or worry or excessive sadness or addiction to alcohol or pornography or shopping or eating or TV watching? You will only make progress against these persistent sins by fixing your attention on Christ and then trusting the HS to give to you a spiritual sense of the glory of Christ in such a way that the pleasure you get from these ways of living grows stale while Christ becomes fresh and living to you. Just as Israel watched for the cloud to move so we are to watch for the work of the HS who reveals the glory of Christ to us in such a way that he becomes the source of all our happiness and security rather than sin.

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