

Numbers 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 6 Not even the seeds or the skins.

All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of his hair of his head grow long.

All the days that he separates himself to the Lord, he shall not go near a dead body, not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister. If they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head.

All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord. And if any man dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing.

On the seventh day he shall shave it. On the eighth day he shall bring two turtle doves or two pigeons to the priest to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the dead body.

[1 : 29] And he shall consecrate his head that same day, and separate himself to the Lord for the days of his separation, and bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering. But the previous period shall be void, because his separation was defiled.

And this is the law for the Nazarite, when the time of his separation has been completed. He shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he shall bring his gift to the Lord, one male lamb a year old without blemish for a burnt offering, and one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin offering, and one ram without blemish as a peace offering, and a basket of unleavened bread, loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and their grain offering, and their drink offerings.

And the priest shall bring them before the Lord, and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering. And he shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of peace offering to the Lord, with the basket of unleavened bread.

The priest shall offer also its grain offering and its drink offering. And the Nazarite shall shave his consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head, and put it on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace offering.

And the priest shall take the shoulder of the ram, when it is boiled, and one unleavened loaf out of the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them on the hands of the Nazarite, after he has shaved the head of his consecration.

[2 : 56] And the priest shall wave them for a wave offering before the Lord. They are a holy portion for the priest, together with the breast that is waved, and the thigh that is contributed. And after that the Nazarite may drink wine.

This is the law of the Nazarite. But if he vows an offering to the Lord above his Nazarite vow, as he can afford, in exact accordance with the vow that he takes, then he shall do in addition to the law of the Nazarite.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his son, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

Numbers chapter 6 describes a special vow, not entirely dissimilar to becoming a temporary monk or nun, perhaps. The person taking a Nazarite vow would be offering themselves and their service to the Lord in a voluntary vow.

[4 : 04] Vows were common in the life of Israel. Someone, for instance, could vow something to the Lord, often in response to or in hope of a blessing. And the Nazarite vow is more of a special vow.

The nation is holy to the Lord, set apart from the other nations. But the greatest weight of holiness falls upon the shoulders of the priests. But the Nazarite is someone who takes on voluntarily a greater degree of holiness, commits themselves to a life of separateness, in a more special way.

One could imagine persons who had taken such a vow, forming model communities, or being examples within their specific communities of a more dedicated form of life.

The earlier part of the book of Numbers is concerned with a number of these sorts of dedicated persons, particularly with the Levites. But also in the beginning of Numbers chapter 5, we see the concern that everyone maintain a certain degree of cleanness within the camp.

Command the people of Israel, that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.

[5 : 20] In the case of people who are presenting a vow to the Lord, if they were presenting a person in a special vow, in this Nazarite vow, for instance, some ransom or tribute would have to be offered.

As Leviticus chapter 27 dictates, coming before the Lord brought the person to the Lord's attention and required a ransom or tribute to ensure that that attention was not for judgment.

Now in many ways, Nazarites are temporary priests, and we'll see many of the similarities between the Nazarite and the priest, and even the high priest, as we go through this. You can also see other characters that were temporarily set apart in a more holy way.

People going to war seem to have to pay some sort of muster tax for the census, and also to have a temporary holy status, as we see in the way that David talks about the men who are with him in 1 Samuel chapter 21, or the way that Uriah the Hittite will not go back to his home and sleep with his wife in 2 Samuel chapter 11 verses 6 to 13.

Priests and Levites were a sort of standing army, but the army, when it was mustered and going out to war, had to keep a certain degree of holiness. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 9 to 14 describes this.

[6 : 34] When you are encamped against your enemies, then you shall keep yourself from every evil thing. If any man among you becomes unclean because of a nocturnal omission, then he shall go outside the camp.

He shall not come inside the camp, but when evening comes, he shall bathe himself in water, and as the sun sets, he may come inside the camp. You shall have a place outside the camp, and you shall go out to it, and you shall have a trowel with your tools, and when you sit down outside, you shall dig a hole with it, and turn back and cover up your excrement.

Because the Lord your God walks in the midst of your camp to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you.

The firstborn sons of Israel also needed to be deconsecrated. They were set apart to the Lord, and they had to be redeemed. All of these aspects of consecration and deconsecration are seen in places like Leviticus chapter 27.

We see the firstborn in Exodus chapter 13, and here we see the character of the Nazarite, who follows many of these patterns. The Nazarite is one dedicated or consecrated to the Lord.

[7 : 48] In Leviticus chapter 25, verses 5 and 11, untrimmed vines are referred to as your Nazarites. There's an analogy between untrimmed hair and unpruned vegetation.

Vegetation is the hair of the earth, and in both of these cases, there's something dedicated to the Lord. The hair is associated with glory. We also see such terminology applied to the consecrated head, to the royal crown, or to the high priest diadem.

Women could also become Nazarites. The Nazarites didn't perform priestly functions, they didn't get to eat of the priestly food, but they were similarly dedicated to the Lord, and they had a closeness and a holiness to the Lord that was similar to the priests.

Some of the requirements that they had to observe are similar to those that are placed upon the priests. Leviticus chapter 10, verse 9, for instance, referring to the priests, 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. Now the restrictions on the Nazarites seem to go even further. They're not just avoiding wine, they're avoiding all the fruit of the vine, and all products from the vine, and they're also avoiding it, not just when they go into the house, they're not serving in the temple, they're avoiding it all the time, for the period of the duration of their vow.

[9 : 14] In Leviticus chapter 21, verses 10 to 12, the requirements of the high priest are interesting here. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes.

He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. He shall not go out of the sanctuary, lest he profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him.

I am the Lord. The same requirement to avoid all dead bodies is expected of the Nazarite, and indeed if the Nazarite ends up accidentally having contact with a dead body, his whole vow to that point is nullified, and he has to start over again, and the sacrifice that he has to perform at this point with the guilt offering is described within this chapter.

We have a number of examples of Nazarites in Scripture. Nazarite vows, typically, that lasted for the entirety of a person's life. Although these weren't normal, these are the examples that we have most prominently in Scripture.

In 1 Samuel 1, verse 11 of Samuel, And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

[10 : 43] Of Samson, in Judges 13, verses 3-5, And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, Behold, you are barren and have not born children, but you shall conceive and bear a son.

Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines.

Luke chapter 1, verses 13-15 of John the Baptist, But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John.

And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb.

We see Paul taking a vow in the book of Acts that may be an Azarite vow. It certainly seems to have similar features. Acts 18, verse 18. After this, Paul stayed many days longer, and then took leave of the brothers, and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila.

[11 : 56] At Sancria he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. The Nazarite would have to offer a sacrifice for deconsecration, to return to normal life, and as he sacrificed that, he was also offering up the token of his service, the time that he had been dedicated in offering up his hair.

If his vow were broken, part way through touching a dead body, for instance, the hair would not be offered, and he would have to start again at the beginning. To complete the vow, the Nazarite had to bring a burnt offering, loaves, grain and drink offerings, sin offering, a peace offering.

It was very costly. Male lamb, a year old, a ewe lamb, a year old, and a ram. This is quite a significant sum of money that it would cost to get all of these elements. But we should notice the parallels with the sacrifices of Leviticus chapter 8, where the high priest and his sons are being dedicated for their service.

Particularly in Leviticus chapter 8, verses 22 to 29. Then he presented the other ram, the ram of ordination, and we've seen that this is similar to the peace offering, although it's a variation on it, for the ordination rite.

And Aaron and his sons laid their hands on the head of the ram, and he killed it. And Moses took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.

[13 : 15] Then he presented Aaron's sons, and Moses put some of the blood on the lobes of their right ears, and on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet. And Moses drew the blood against the sides of the altar.

Then he took the fat and the fat tail, and all the fat that was on the entrails, and the long lobe of the liver, and the two kidneys with their fat and the right thigh. And out of the basket of unleavened bread that was before the Lord, he took one unleavened loaf, and one loaf of bread with oil, and one wafer, and placed them on the pieces of fat, and on the right thigh.

And he put all of these in the hands of Aaron, and in the hands of his sons, and waved them as a wave offering before the Lord. Then Moses took them from their hands, and burned them on the altar with the burnt offering.

This was an ordination offering, with a pleasing aroma, a food offering to the Lord. And Moses took the breast, and waved it for a wave offering before the Lord. It was Moses' portion of the ram of ordination, as the Lord commanded Moses.

The priest also gets to eat the shoulder of the ram of the peace offering for the Nazarite. It's a greater degree of the peace offering that's received by the Lord and his servants from the normal peace offering.

[14 : 25] It's a suggestion that there's a higher degree of consecration of the offerer here. And so more of their offering is being eaten by the Lord and his servants. The main difference is the substitution of a ewe lamb for the bull of the sin offering.

And Leviticus chapter 4 says that a common person had to offer a ewe lamb, but the priest offered a bull. The hair of the consecrated head is shaved off and put on the fire of the sacrifice of the peace offering.

The glory of the hair that has grown during that period of dedication to the Lord is being offered to him as a sign of the fulfilment of all of that. And this was one of the ways in which a commoner could draw nearer to the Lord.

You didn't have to be a priest to do this. This could be something that anyone could take up. With the presence of Nazarites among the people, people taking either temporary vows or longer term vows, and maybe living in communities of those who had taken such vows, there would be a testimony to the status of Israel as holy to the Lord.

Not just the priests, but something that was more common to the general people. This chapter ends with the threefold blessing of Aaron. God desires to bless his people.

[15:38] And especially significantly, he wants his people to bear his name. This was one of the great tasks of the Aaronic priesthood. In 1 Chronicles chapter 23 verse 13, we read, This blessing has a poetic form.

There are three, then five, then seven words in each line. And there are 15, 20, and 25 letters in these words. This blessing was a particularly significant one in Israel's history, a particularly prominent one.

And we see it being alluded to in places like Psalm 67 and Psalm 121. It calls for the Lord to bless, to make the person prosper while preserving them from evil, maybe preserving them from the temptations that can come with blessing.

The Lord make you know the warmth of his presence and kindness, his face shining upon you, and be gracious to you. You feel the goodness of God, and you feel the warmth of his favour.

The Lord turn his attention to you and grant you wholeness and rest. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. It's as if God gives you eye contact, that God looks at your particular situation.

[17:07] He's not just giving you the warmth of his general benevolence to his people, he's giving you more particular favour and attention. And the importance of all of this is that God wants to put his name upon his people.

He wants his people to bear his name, to be identified as his people, and for him to be identified as their God. When we talk about bearing the name of the Lord, this is part of what we have in mind, that we are people who are blessed by the name of the Lord.

We are people who have the name of the Lord placed upon us. We are identified with him, and he is identified with us. And we should never act in a way that treats that as an empty or a light thing.

That would be bearing the name of the Lord in vain. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which we could learn from the institution of the Nazarite today?

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