

Reformation Fellowship Notes • September 2, 2018
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Handout #5
Numbers 9 to 10:10

I. Introduction

- A. Chapters 1-10 are about Israel's steps to get organized before continuing its journey.
 - 1. When they left Egypt, they were not a people and they were not organized.
 - 2. At Sinai, God made a covenant with them.
 - a) They became a people.
 - b) They received law.
 - c) They built a Tabernacle—God was in their midst.
 - 3. In Numbers 1-10 (still at Sinai), there are further developments.
 - a) Census to become an organized military
 - b) Census to organize Levites for service of Tabernacle
 - c) Additional laws
 - d) Levites consecrated
 - 4. Now, before their departure, they will celebrate Passover.
- B. Then I will give my tentative understanding of what God is trying to do by giving them all the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

II. Numbers 9:1-14

- A. It has been a year since the Israelites celebrated Passover in Egypt.
 - 1. They are to do it just as it was originally commanded.
 - 2. They did it just as they had been told.
- B. An unusual circumstance has presented a conundrum.
 - 1. This is another instance where a law that had been given earlier needed to be expanded upon.
 - 2. An Israelite had contact with a corpse just before Passover.
 - a) This makes this person temporarily unclean.
 - (1) They have concluded that an unclean person can't celebrate Passover.
 - (a) And yet they are required to celebrate Passover.
 - 3. How had they concluded that an unclean person can't celebrate Passover?
 - a) Lev. 21:1-12 says that if a priest has contact with a dead person, it defiles him.
 - b) In Numbers 5:1-4, we saw that anyone who comes into contact with a dead person is defiled and must leave the camp.
 - c) In Numbers 6, we saw that a Nazirite who comes into contact with a dead person is defiled and must be atoned and then recommence the period of the vow.

- d) Later, in Numbers 19:1-22, it is made clear that anyone who has contact with a corpse is made unclean, and the procedure for becoming clean again is stipulated
 - e) They must have assumed that one who is unclean can't celebrate Passover.
 - (1) Assumed that only a holy person can celebrate a holy day?
 - (2) Maybe a cultural assumption from ANE culture?
4. Moses takes this question to God, and He responds.
- a) One who is unclean may wait and celebrate Passover one month late.
 - (1) This tacitly affirms the assumption that one who is unclean may not celebrate Passover.
 - b) This is followed by a reminder to do some of the key things in the Passover.
 - (1) They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs,
 - (2) Leave none until morning,
 - (3) Break no bones.
 - (4) The emphasis is on the meal.
 - (a) No mention of putting blood on the doorposts!!
 - (i) One would think that this would be critical.
 - (ii) Did they discontinue this practice?
 - (b) I find this very mysterious.
 - c) God goes beyond the question raised and makes provision for an Israelite who is traveling during Passover.
 - (1) This probably has a merchant in mind.
 - (a) This would not have been an issue at the time they are at Mount Sinai.
 - (b) This would only have been an issue when they settle in the Promised Land.
 - (i) God is addressing this problem before it has become a problem.
 - (ii) The community of God is clean, but to go outside is to be in the realm of the unclean.

“The person who is away on a distant journey, i.e., a journey that takes him or her outside the covenant community of Israel, is also in the realm of the unclean, separated from the community. In this way the two regulations are similar—both deal with people who are outside the covenant community, at least temporarily.” (Ashley, p. 180)

5. In Exodus, whoever failed to celebrate the Passover would be killed by the angel of death.
- a) Here, the penalty is to be cut off from the people.

“The exact meaning of the phrase *be cut off from the people* has been much debated. Some have argued that it probably meant excommunication from Israel, which at least in the wilderness period, could have meant almost certain death. Others have posited that the expression meant “to put to death judicially.” Still others have seen in it the ominous threat that, in some way, at some unknown time, God himself would destroy the offender. The probability is that, in specific contexts, the idiom could mean any of the three, especially the last.” (Ashley, p. 181)

6. A resident alien was to be allowed to celebrate the Passover.
 - a) A *ger* is a non-Israelite who moves in and adopts the life of an Israelite.
 - (1) It is not just someone passing through.
 - (2) *Gerim* were to be respected because the Israelites had been foreigners in Egypt (Deut. 23:7).
 - (3) But to celebrate the Passover, one had to be circumcised (Ex. 12:48).
 - b) Both Israelites and *gerim* are under the same law.

III. Numbers 9:15-23

- A. This section explains how God led the Israelites through the wilderness.
 1. This section repeats the content of what was said in the last few verses of Exodus.
 - a) As soon as Moses finished assembling the Tabernacle, a cloud descended on it and filled the tent.
 - b) From that time on, the cloud covered the tent during the day and a fire-like light covered it at night.
 - (1) It was like this throughout their journeying.
 - c) Whenever the cloud lifted, that was a sign that it was time to move.
 - (1) So, the Israelites would get ready and set out.
 - d) But no matter how long the cloud settled on the Tabernacle, the Israelites would not go on until it lifted and showed the way to go.
 - (1) If the cloud stayed on the Tabernacle a few days, they stayed camped a few days.
 - (2) If the cloud moved the next morning, then they moved on the next morning.
 2. Two facts are stressed in this section.
 - a) God provided meticulous guidance.
 - b) The Israelites followed this guidance carefully.
 - (1) Not much advanced notice was given.
 - (2) It was mostly non-verbal guidance.

“It is quite deliberate that the phrase *‘al pi YHWH* occurs seven times in this passage, for it emphasizes that Israel’s march to its promised land was conducted only by the direction of God, not by man, not even by a Moses.” (Milgrom, p. 72)

“The elaboration of the account (vers. 15-23), which abounds with repetitions, is intended to bring out the importance of the fact, and to awaken the consciousness not only of the absolute dependence of Israel upon the guidance of Jehovah, but also of the gracious care of their God, which was thereby displayed to the Israelites throughout all their journeyings.” (Keil, p. 54)

IV. Numbers 10:1-10

- A. Using a cloud, God signaled when and where the people were to go. Now the people need a way to organize themselves to act on God's command.
1. God commanded Moses to make two trumpets.
 - a) Made of silver
 - b) Forged (not cast)
 2. How different commands are signaled:
 - a) Summon people to the Tabernacle.
 - (1) Two trumpets blown
 - (a) The whole congregation
 - (2) One trumpet blown
 - (a) Just the elders assemble
 - b) Signal the people to start marching.
 - (1) Blow an alarm
 - (a) First tribes set out
 - (2) Blow a second alarm
 - (a) Next tribes set out
 3. The priests blow the trumpets.
 4. When you are in the land
 - a) This is another instance where a law is given that will only be carried out when they are settled in the land.
 - b) Blow an alarm when attacked by enemies,
 - (1) So that God will remember you and save you.
 - c) On holidays and new moons, blow trumpets over sacrifices.
 - (1) So that God will remember you and accept them.
 - d) YHWH is their God.
 - (1) YHWH is the one and only source of security and peace.

V. Why Chapters 1-10 are in Numbers

- A. There is a major break in the text at this point.
1. After their several months stay at Mount Sinai, they recommence their journey.
 2. The rest of the book has much more action.
- B. Chapters 1-10 constitute a restart.
1. When the Israelites left Egypt, things were very different.
 - a) They were not a people.
 - b) They were not organized.
 - c) They had no law.
 - d) They did not have a covenant with YHWH.
 2. This is a new start.

- a) They are now a people.
 - b) God has given them camp organization.
 - c) The Levites were consecrated.
 - d) The Tabernacle was consecrated.
 - e) They have law.
3. This gives us an opportunity to compare how the same set of people behave in these two separate situations.
- a) This is what we will look at as we proceed.

VI. My understanding of the law

- A. What is the *main* purpose of the law?
- 1. It is to show us who God is and what He is doing.
 - a) It is not exclusively to tell us how people ought to behave.
- B. The law is God's solution to a difficult problem.
- 1. How does a transcendent, holy, creator God communicate who He is to mortal, sinful, stupid human beings?
 - a) A number of ways
 - (1) General revelation (the world around us)
 - (2) Revelation to individuals
 - b) God's dealings with the people of Israel
 - (1) History of that people
 - (2) Scripture
- C. The laws and customs were given to that people to communicate God's nature.
- 1. What does it mean to say that God is holy?
 - a) The word holy means "to be set apart."
 - b) But this is not very helpful.
 - 2. Some laws help us understand what righteousness is.
 - a) One aspect of God's holiness is that He is wholly righteous.
 - (1) The law says, "Thou shalt not steal."
 - (a) To not steal is not righteousness.
 - (i) But it does approximate righteousness.
 - (b) To be the kind of person that does not even seriously consider stealing because God does not like stealing is an even closer approximation.
 - b) So, the laws dealing with personal behavior paint a picture of those behaviors that are exhibited by a righteous person.
 - 3. Some laws help us understand more comprehensively who God is and what He is doing.
 - a) To understand how a holy God has chosen to relate to his unholy creatures, God has set up a "play."
 - b) This "play" symbolically represents some of the spiritual principles built into reality.
 - (1) Purity of holiness

- (a) In that “play,” there are more holy people (priests) and less holy people (lepers).
 - (i) If priests contact lepers, the priests must go through a ceremony to restore their holiness.
 - (b) But this is just a “play.”
 - (i) The priests are not really more holy than the lepers.
 - (ii) The priest does not really lose holiness by touching a leper.
 - (c) But it contains important truths.
 - (i) Holiness is completely incompatible with the profane.
 - (ii) They cannot be mixed at all.
- (2) The resolution of sin
- (a) In the “play,” sin must be atoned through sacrifice.
 - (i) Sin is so evil that an animal must be put to death in order for there to be restitution.
 - (b) But this is just a “play.”
 - (i) To sacrifice a lamb accomplishes absolutely nothing.
 - (c) But it contains important truths.
 - (i) Sin must be dealt with by death.
 - (ii) Vicarious death is effective.
 - (iii) Death of an innocent life
4. This “play,” even though it is just a “play,” is a serious matter.
- a) Violators were to be punished.
5. The laws we have seen so far in Numbers are of this kind.
- D. Some implications of this view of the religious laws as a “play”:
- 1. The actors are not necessarily what they represent.
 - a) A priest is not necessarily more holy than a leper.
 - 2. Every detail in the “play” is potentially, and I would say probably, significant.
 - 3. All that the “play” represents is consistent with reality and other forms of divine revelation.
 - 4. The “play” may be only acted out for a certain period of time.
 - a) There is no inherent goodness in the “play.”
 - b) The laws that define the “play” are only valid for the length of the “play.”
 - (1) When the “play” is no longer being enacted, the laws that establish and regulate the play are no longer valid.
 - (2) By contrast, the laws that define righteousness do not have a limited shelf life.