

2. Preparing a People (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 5, 6; Ezek. 33:15; Luke 19:8, 9; Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.

Quotes

- Your position never gives you the right to command. It only imposes on you the duty of so living your life that others can receive your orders without being humiliated. *Dag Hammarskjold*
- He who establishes his argument by noise and command shows that his reason is weak. *Michel de Montaigne*
- Never pretend to a love which you do not actually feel, for love is not ours to command. *Alan Watts*
- Always do everything you ask of those you command. *George S. Patton*
- Any fool can make a rule, and any fool will mind it. *Henry David Thoreau*
- Reason to rule but mercy to forgive: the first is law; the last, prerogative. *John Dryden*
- Love is the ultimate outlaw. It just won't adhere to any rules. *Tom Watson*

Questions

How are we to understand these rules and regulations? What of the test for an unfaithful wife? In what way is God dealing with people who are the product of their times? What is the meaning for us today of a “Nazirite vow”? How do we see God acting through these instructions? What are the benefits, what are the dangers?

Bible discussion

Numbers 5 gives detailed instructions on the process to be followed if a wife is suspected of unfaithfulness, while chapter 6 explains the requirements of a Nazirite vow. While much of this may seem very distant in time, place, and culture from today, we also have to consider the alternatives. At least a process is required to be followed if adultery is suspected—and a priest is to be involved. This does provide for something more than guilt by accusation, and also would demonstrate the Lord's involvement, though it may seem to us as something of a trial by ordeal.

Similarly chapter 6 gives explicit instructions of what is necessary for the Nazirite vow, to be “separate” from ordinary people as a vow of dedication to God. Interestingly the issue of abstinence from alcohol figures prominently along with ritual requirements.

Ezekiel 33:15 shows that recompense is desirable, something announced by Zacchaeus in Luke 19: 8, 9. The way we live reveals the kind of people we are (see Acts 17:28; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20).

Comment

The very detailed way in which suspicions of a wife's adultery are to be dealt with (note a husband's adultery is not detailed here!) may seem strange to us. However by bringing such suspicions out in the open, and before God, at least some kind of due process is followed—the man cannot just dismiss a wife based on suspicions.

However the level at which such a command is operating (and we have no Biblical record that such a process was ever followed) indicates the kind of people God is dealing with. In fact the whole of the Book of Numbers needs to be seen against this backdrop—of a people newly-emerged from slavery, following many pagan superstitions, and a long way from understanding what God really wanted. For this reason God has to follow a command-based system that requires compliance in order that some kind of order may be achieved.

The requirements of the Nazirite vow similarly are spelled out so that everyone will know what this really means. Like the rest of the giving of the law, it spells out in great detail what is and is not acceptable behaviour. This is necessary when dealing with people who are looking for direction—so that they can know right from wrong, and not be confused. However this only works in the immediate situation, and unless principles are learned, they cannot be used in different situations. This is the issue of the law that was added because of transgression—so we would know where we were. But this understanding and recognition does not save—it only says that we are wrong. It is for this reason that though the law is useful, it can only point out our failures, and cannot heal the damage of sin. Only God can do that.

The title for this study is “Preparing a People.” The real question is “what kind of people?” Is God looking for servants who simply do as they’re told without thinking, or friends who operate on the level of agreement and trust based on evidence? The tragedy is that when God did come to this world, he did have a people. They observed the letter of the law scrupulously, and imposed religious requirements on everyone. As far as the picture revealed in these chapters of Numbers is concerned, they were doing as they were told. But the tragedy is that when God came to his own, his own received him not—because Jesus was not the God they recognized. So while a rule-based perspective works at one level, in the end it can also be counter-productive, and lead to a rejection of God as he is.

Ellen White Comments

The principles of the character of God were the foundation of the education constantly kept before the heavenly angels. These principles were goodness, mercy, and love. Self-evidencing light was to be recognized and freely accepted by all who occupied positions of trust and power. They must accept God’s principles, and, through the presentation of truth and righteousness, convince all who were in his service. This was the only power to be used. Force must never come in. All who thought that their position gave them power to command their fellow beings, and control conscience, must be deprived of their position; for this is not God’s plan. {RH, September 7, 1897}

In every command and in every promise of the word of God is the power, the very life of God, by which the command may be fulfilled and the promise realized. He who by faith receives the word is receiving the very life and character of God. {COL 38}

The man who attempts to keep the commandments of God from a sense of obligation merely--because he is required to do so--will never enter into the joy of obedience. He does not obey. When the requirements of God are accounted a burden because they cut across human inclination, we may know that the life is not a Christian life. True obedience is the outworking of a principle within. It springs from the love of righteousness, the love of the law of God. The essence of all righteousness is loyalty to our Redeemer. This will lead us to do right because it is right--because right doing is pleasing to God. {COL 97-8}

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