

6. Planning Ahead (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 15; 2 Cor. 2:15, 16; Gal. 3:26–29; Eph. 5:2; Col. 3:11.

Quotes

- Most plans are just inaccurate predictions. *Ben Bayol*
- A first-rate Organizer is never in a hurry. He is never late. He always keeps up his sleeve a margin for the unexpected. *Arnold Bennett*
- You can never plan the future by the past. *Edmund Burke*
- Planning is bringing the future into the present so that you can do something about it now. *Alan Lakein*
- You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there. *Yogi Berra*
- When you come to a fork in the road, take it. *Yogi Berra*

Questions

In what ways are we to make sacrifices to God today? How do we represent God in the way we talk about him, and the way we live our lives? Why is it important to clarify the God we *don't* believe in? How is dealing with sin a question of “planning ahead”? What is the most important aspect of what we would wish to plan for with God?

Bible discussion

The commands from God in Numbers 15 seem heavy to us today. However in order to instil into these hard-hearted people, God needed to take extreme measures. The requirement to make offerings first, to have a special sacrifice of firstfruits, was to make the people realize that they owed everything to God. When they settled the land, and at every harvest, they were to remember God first above all else. Only then could they stay on track. And only as God told them ahead of time what to do were they likely to remember.

There is also much in this chapter about unintentional sin, and how it was supposed to be taken care of. In this we see the graciousness of God in working with people who were deficient and forgetful, much like us. Intentional sin required exclusion from the community, since it cut at the heart of the God-human relationship.

The Sabbath-breaker was stoned at God's explicit command, since the people didn't seem to know what to do. The one had to die for the others to realize how significant the sin really was. Here again we see God operating in terms of emergency measures. (My thought is that the paragraph should end with the reinforcement that this is an emergency measure. This is one of those places that non-believers would point at in depicting the harshness of God. And on face value it does seem that way.)

Comment

“The sin offering atoned for their sin. The burnt offering represented a renewal of the congregation's consecration to God. How interesting that the Lord would distinguish between things done unintentionally and that which was deliberate. At the same time, however, even the things done unintentionally were deemed “sin” and needed to be

atoned for.” (Tuesday’s lesson). How would you explain the meaning of the word “atone” used here? What is it that God really wishes to accomplish?

The specifics of this study are important, but the deeper aspects involve the character of God, and how he is perceived. How would you think an Israelite of the time would have described God and his nature? It’s easy enough to conclude, as many have, that such a religious system is based on demands, that it encourages ideas of fear and guilt, and that it can easily become exploitative:

“Whenever I think of how religion started, I picture some frustrated old man making out a list of all the ways he could gain power, until he finally came up with the great solution of constant fear and guilt, then he leaped up and started planning a new wardrobe.” (Steve Blake).

Or in the words of Stendhal, “All religions are founded on the fear of the many and the cleverness of the few.”

But this is not the God I believe in. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn said so provocatively, “The single biggest cause of the problems of the twentieth century is that we have forgotten God.” Or perhaps more accurately, we’ve rejected a caricature of God.

The way God is often perceived is a God that we should clearly reject. The sacrificial system, the way of “dealing” with sin, needs to be rightly understood, or God can seem arbitrary, unforgiving, and severe. We need to make sure we don’t fall into the trap of misrepresenting God, of portraying God as the Devil does. It’s important to define the God we *don’t* believe in!

“The God I don’t believe in is arbitrary and capricious, distant, judgmental, punishing, demanding and whiny, needs to be placated, and has let the world go to hell in a hand basket. The God I don’t believe in was indifferent to the suffering of the victims of the Holocaust... The God I don’t believe in had such an arbitrary and capricious personality that he required the painful and bloody death of his only begotten son to satisfy his disappointment with his sinful human creation.” Reverend Roberta Finkelstein

Ellen White Comments

From the beginning it has been Satan’s studied plan to cause men to forget God, that he might secure them to himself. Hence he has sought to misrepresent the character of God, to lead men to cherish a false conception of Him. The Creator has been presented to their minds as clothed with the attributes of the prince of evil himself,—as arbitrary, severe, and unforgiving,—that He might be feared, shunned, and even hated by men. Satan hoped to so confuse the minds of those whom he had deceived that they would put God out of their knowledge. Then he would obliterate the divine image in man and impress his own likeness upon the soul; he would imbue men with his own spirit and make them captives according to his will.

It was by falsifying the character of God and exciting distrust of Him that Satan tempted Eve to transgress. By sin the minds of our first parents were darkened, their natures were degraded, and their conceptions of God were molded by their own narrowness and selfishness. And as men became bolder in sin, the knowledge and the love of God faded from their minds and hearts. “Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God,” they “became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.” {5T 738}

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