

NUMBERS 5-9 PROTECTING CAMP FROM DISEASE; LEVITES CONSECRATED

As we begin, please remember the primary focus of these studies is to find the spiritual lessons behind these accounts. As Paul said, "For whatever things were written before *were written for our learning*, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (1 Cor. 15:4).

We now travel back to the time when Israel is very close to departing for the Promised Land. Remember, they thought it would be a relatively short trek of a few months before they would enter, and that was what God desired. But as everything else described in the Bible, it all depends on the choice one makes—either for blessings or cursings. God wants the best, but it's up to us to decide whether, through our obedience or disobedience, it will be a long, tortuous road or a short one. We are not automatons, but have free will to decide things.

There are spiritual parallels in this account. Just as God prepares and organizes Israel to enter the Promised Land, so He does with His Church, so its members can finally enter the Kingdom of God. He desires an orderly, united and peaceful church, as 1 Cor. 14:33, 40 says, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints...Let all things be done decently and in order."

God organized the tribes of Israel so that the most numerous tribes were in front and rear. In this way, if they were attacked, the enemy would have to face the strongest forces. If Israel was attacked at its flanks, it simply rotated its tribes so the numerous tribes were in front. In the same way, God places in the church its ministers and deacons in front, to defend the most weak among us (1 Tim. 3:1-13). But this protection is only extended to those inside the camp. Those that choose, for whatever reason, to leave the camp were no longer protected, and would eventually be destroyed by the enemy always waiting to see who it can devour (1 Peter 5:8).

So, after organizing Israel into orderly sections so they could be better protected, now God reminds them of His Holy presence and His valuable health and sanitary laws before they depart from Sinai.

Sanitary laws to protect Israel from plagues

God expected Israel to be a pure nation, different than the rest, just as He wants His church to be spiritually pure and not worldly. He says, "Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, every one who has a discharge, and

whoever becomes defiled by a corpse. You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them *outside the camp*, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell" (Numbers 5:2-3).

To clarify, the Hebrew word here for "leper" is actually a more general term and means any infectious skin disease. As *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* explains, "This included **an infectious skin disease**, a bodily **discharge of any kind**, and the contamination resulting from contact with **a dead body**." The Jewish historian Josephus mentions in his writings that these included sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea.

Why such care before beginning the journey? It is obvious that God did not want infectious diseases and plagues to spread through this large community. So He instituted the laws of quarantine, still used today. *Adam Clarke's Commentary* points out, "According to the preceding plan, it is sufficiently evident that each camp had a space behind it, and on one side, where the infected might be removed...But the expulsion mentioned here was founded on: 1). A purely physical reason, viz., the diseases were contagious, and therefore there was a necessity of putting those afflicted by them apart, that the infection might not be communicated. 2). There was also a spiritual reason; the camp was the habitation of God, and nothing impure should be permitted to remain where He dwelt."

Law protecting an innocent wife

Next, God is concerned with the *moral* purity in His camp. To avoid immorality in the marriage, He explains there would be a method to assure the purity of the marriage and to prevent a source of adultery.

He says, "If any man's wife goes astray and behaves unfaithfully toward him, and a man lies with her carnally, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and it is concealed that she has defiled herself, and there was no witness against her, nor was she caught—if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him...then the man shall bring his wife to the priest...and the priest shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water...When he has made her drink the water, then it shall be, if she has defiled herself and behaved unfaithfully toward her husband, that the water that brings a curse will enter her and become bitter, and her belly will swell, her thigh will rot, and the woman will become a curse among her people. But if the

woman has not defiled herself, and is clean, then she shall be free and may conceive children” (Numbers 5:11-28).

This law prevented a jealous husband from banishing or killing his wife. *Nelson’s Study Commentary* mentions, “A woman could be divorced in the ancient world on the mere suspicion of unfaithfulness [thus leaving her destitute]. Without the limitations of laws such as this, a woman might even have been murdered by a jealous husband just on the suspicion of unfaithfulness. Here at least there was an opportunity for the woman to prove her innocence before an enraged husband. Bitter water that brings a curse was not a ‘magic potion,’ nor was there some hidden ingredient in the water. The addition of dust from the floor of the tabernacle to a vessel of holy water and the scrapings from the bill of indictment (verse 23) were signs of a *spiritual reality*. Holy water and dust from the holy place symbolized that *God* was the One who determined the innocence or guilt of the woman who had come before the priest.”

Today, we have something that the physical Israelites did not have--God’s Holy Spirit. There is a spirit of discernment by the fruits and repentance available today, and as Paul says, “Some men’s sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later. Likewise, the good works of some are clearly evident, and those that are otherwise cannot be hidden” (1 Tim. 5:24-25).

The Nazirite Vow

Another aspect of moral purity is the Nazirite vow: “When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink...nothing that is produced by the grapevine...All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head, until the days are fulfilled...He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother” (Num. 6:2-8).

First, we should not confuse the term Nazirite with Nazarene. Nazarene means “from Nazareth” and has nothing to do with being a Nazirite. Some think Christ was a Nazirite when He was only a Nazarene. The Scriptures mentions only three who were Nazirites for life: Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist (Judges 13:4, 5; 1 Sam. 1:11; Luke 1:15). Paul undertook a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18) and later

performed this service for four members of the church of Jerusalem (Acts 21:23). By the way, Paul was showing that this part of the law, although still in effect for converted Jews, was not applicable for converted Gentiles (Acts 21:24-25). He would explain more about this in Galatians and Ephesians.

The spiritual parallel to the Nazirite vow is baptism and a commitment to serve God for one’s *entire* life, as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

The priestly blessing, discovery of silver scrolls

The next section shows how God wants to bless those dedicated to Him. “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace” (Num. 6:24-26).

This priestly blessing was so popular in Israel that it was actually found etched in two silver scrolls considered to be the earliest archaeological finding that quotes Scripture, around the years 600-700 BC. The next oldest, some 300 years later, are parts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1979, the archaeologist Gabriel Barkay found in a Jerusalem cave a pair of small cylindrical scrolls made of pure silver as amulets to be worn around the neck. They contained eighteen lines of Hebrew script when unrolled, including the words: “*May Yahweh bless you and keep you. May Yahweh cause his face to shine upon you and grant you peace.*”

This discovery was a major blow to those scholars and other Bible critics who claim that the books of Moses were actually not written until the Hellenistic period in the third century B.C.

Now in chapter 7, we go back a month to when the Tabernacle was dedicated. Here, Moses describes the blessings the tribal leaders bring to God. Although Israel had a lot of moral problems, it was known for its great generosity—a trait that continues through the ages and seen in the generosity of the U.S., Great Britain, and the rest of the descendants of the tribes of Israel.

In preparation for the trip from Sinai to the Promised Land the tribal leaders brought to God gifts of six wagons and 12 oxen. These would be at the disposal of the Levites to help them in their work of transporting the Tabernacle and its contents (vv. 4-5). Moses therefore distributed the oxen and carts as

follows: two carts and 4 oxen to the Gershonites, four carts and 8 oxen to the Merarites, but none to the Kohathites because they were to bear the sacred objects on their shoulders (4:15). Failure to do this later brought great grief to David when the ark was carried in a cart and Uzzah died when he touched it to stabilize it (2 Sam. 6:3; 7-8).

Consecration of the Levites

Another aspect that has to be prepared before their departure is the consecration of the Levites as God's ministers. "So you shall bring the Levites before the Lord...and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the Lord, like a wave offering from the children of Israel, that they may perform the work of the Lord...Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine" (Num. 8:14).

The purpose of the laying on of hands, mentioned here, is to set someone apart for a specific purpose such as in ordinations and healings. The first mention of laying on of hands in the Scriptures is when Israel (Jacob) placed his blessing and name on Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:13). In this case of the Levites, we see representatives of all Israel laying on their hands to set the Levites apart for the special service of the Tabernacle (verse 10). The laying on of hands, according to the book of Hebrews, is one of the basic doctrines of the Bible (6:1-2).

So Aaron presents them as a wave sheaf offering, to be accepted by God. Interestingly, Jesus Christ, our High Priest today, also "lifts" His servants—to present them before God the Father as a wave offering (Eph. 4:10-13). For the Levites, there was a training period of five years, a sort of apprenticeship, before they assumed their full duties at age 30 (verse 24; 4:3). Since the job required much hard, physical work, after age 50, they could continue training younger Levites, but not continue with the heavy part of the work (4:3; 8:25-26).

Before departing Sinai, God instructs Israel to participate in the Passover. But an issue comes up, "Now there were certain men who were defiled by a human corpse, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day, and they came before Moses and Aaron that day...And Moses said to them, 'Stand still, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you.' Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'If anyone of you or your posterity is unclean because of a corpse, or is far away on a journey, he may still keep the Lord's Passover. On the fourteenth

day of the second month, at twilight, they may keep it'" (Num. 9:6-11).

Chapter 10 is another inset, and describes the actions of the pillar of cloud during the day and the shining fire at night. "So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents...Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey" (Num. 9:16).

The Expositor's Bible Commentary says, "Both the cloud and the fire were striking, unusual, and unexpected. These were symbols one would not, could not ignore. They were awesome and eerie, unnatural and unexpected, comforting and protective. To relieve the heat of the desert sun, there was a cloud by day. To reverse the cold darkness of the desert night, there was the comforting fire overhead."

The apostle Paul referred to this passage when he admonished the brethren in Corinth not to take their salvation for granted. They should remember how triumphantly Israel began and how tragically most ended. He said, "Moreover brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things became our examples" (1 Cor. 10:1-6).