

Sunday 23rd June 2024

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[0 : 00] We're still camping, have you noticed? Shall we just pray before we start? Lord, thank you for your word. Thank you that it speaks today.

! Sometimes it seems that it speaks from a very far away place. So if that's this morning, then help us Lord. Help us by drawing near to us. Thank you that the same God who guided his people then is at work today, guiding us today. May we know you better, hear your voice clearly, know your presence with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Do you ever get stuck? I do. I can't seem to get past this feeling. Do you ever have that? It's not sure I'm doing the right thing. I know this is the right thing to do, but I can't commit to it. I need to move, but I'm not sure how.

I'm in a rut. There's a cycle and I need to break it. Do you ever feel like that? I need to get past this hurt. But I'm stuck. Everybody gets stuck sometimes, don't they? How do we move forward when we're stuck?

[1 : 24] What if I told you that the right kind of party can help you move forward? That the right kind of party can actually help you move closer to heaven? Would you believe me?

What's all this got to do with numbers anyway? Here are God's people in the wilderness, heading towards the promised land, a bit like us, if we're God's children. And they need to start moving, don't they? Because we're ten chapters in now and they haven't actually moved a step from Mount Sinai. They need to move. And God says, the right party, that's how you move forward. Look at chapter 9, verses 1 and 2. The Lord spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they came out of Egypt and he said, make the Israelites celebrate.

Celebrate the Passover at the appointed time. There's a party, isn't there? Hold up though, how did we get here? Now some of you may be dropping into the middle of the series on numbers and some of you may not have remembered the details from a couple of weeks back when they were explained.

So, let's think about that. How did we get here? Well, it starts with Abraham. It starts with Abraham and a promise that God makes to Abraham. He says to Abraham, come out of the place where you're living and I will turn you into a nation that will bless the whole world and I will give you a home.

[2 : 51] So that's what Abraham does. He travels 700 miles to Canaan and then 700 miles to what's now Syria and then another 800 miles down to Egypt. That's further than going from London to Moscow.

On foot. That's the distance he's travelled. And Isaac, his son, and Jacob, his son, none of them have any kind of a permanent home.

And then God used Jacob's son Joseph to save the whole of the Middle East, starting with sort of Egypt, from a huge famine that happened. And that is why Joseph and his family, descendants of Abraham, end up settled in Egypt.

And they spent approximately 400 years there. Most of it in slavery. Enslaved to the Egyptians. While God waits patiently for the Egyptians to change and the Canaanites to change.

They don't change. And so God frees his people. And by that time they've grown into a nation called Israel. About 2 million of them. So point of reference, that's about twice the number of people that live in Liverpool.

[3 : 55] It's a lot of people, isn't it? And he leads them out of Egypt, out through the Red Sea. And they're camped at Mount Sinai. Circled in blue there.

Can you see that? And it's taken them a year to get from the Nile Delta in Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai. And there they are, camped out.

You might remember that graphic from a couple of weeks ago. That's what the camp looks like. Can you imagine that? That's not like, you know, a campsite with a few hundred tents. That's towns and villages.

Camped out. The big one that we talked about a few weeks ago, Judah. If I had a pointer, I could point it to you. But it's on the right-hand side, top of the pink column, Judah. 74,600 people.

That's three times the size of Farnham. So that's where they are. With God's gracious and holy presence in the middle. Learning how to be together.

[4 : 57] That's what they're doing in the desert, as John Ross reminded us. Learning how to be with God. That's what all of these instructions are about. And that brings us to our section. So here we are. God is at last preparing them to take their first steps away from Sinai towards the promised land.

How should they move? And there's some really surprising instructions. Because God says, you're going to move forward by looking back and listening up.

Looking back and listening up. Are you a party person? You can answer that in your own head.

You don't all have to shout out. Some people love it, don't they? Really, really love a good party. I like a good party. I like a good party. Until approximately 10.35pm.

And then you can all go home, as far as I'm concerned. There was a really good party going on this week. Taylor Swift had won. I think that was a couple of weeks back in Edinburgh.

[6 : 02] Do you remember the Swifties? They managed to get themselves measured on the Richter scale. There was an earthquake. This is also a party that caused an earthquake in quite a different part of the country, in Hamburg. I like a good party.

Did you get the idea?

There we go. That's my people, by the way. Did you notice? That's the Dutch. They know how to party, don't they? They really do. They caused an earthquake as well. That is a good party, isn't it? I kind of wish I'd been there. That was because they'd beaten somebody at football, in case you were wondering what they were doing. Yeah, that's a party worth being at. I wonder if you ever had that experience when you're at a party, and it's all kind of going fine, and people are having a lot of fun, and they're laughing and joking, and then at a certain point in the evening, there comes that moment where it just feels a little bit artificial.

Everything maybe is a bit too shiny. It's not that there's anything wrong. It's not bad. It's just, where's the soul? Had that experience?

[7 : 54] Where's the part that's beautiful and eternal and transformational and is going to last? Where is it?

That wow moment. Do you remember Mike's leaving party? That was a party with soul, wasn't it? Did more of those, don't we?

So then what makes a good party? Well, God says what makes a good party is actually one where you look backwards. That kind of party moves us forward.

A good party is one with soul. And a party with soul is one that has Jesus at its heart. What do I mean? What do I mean?

Well, verse 2, we've already seen it, haven't we? Make the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time. So God tells his people, right, you need to get moving, so start by celebrating.

[8 : 56] Have a party, but celebrate what? Celebrate, the Lord says, what I did for you. The day I set you free from slavery. The day I spared you from death and put your feet on the path to life.

Celebrate, because that's what you'll be doing when you get there, guys. That's what God says.

That's the Passover. And as John was reminding us last week, if you remember, Jesus is the true Passover lamb, isn't it?

That's what the New Testament tells us. His sacrifice on our behalf frees us from sin and slavery and self and shame. And so we should celebrate as well, by looking back, looking back to his death on the cross for us.

That's how we first got moving, isn't it? That's how we keep moving. That's the moving that we will be doing when we get home. So we move forward by celebrating our freedom.

If you think about it, how we get somewhere matters, doesn't it? So if I'm going to a climate conference, and I go to that climate conference by buying a big 4x4 diesel and driving 10 minutes down the road, something's a bit wrong, isn't it?

[10:20] How we get somewhere matters. The way we get there is supposed to fit where we're going. So we move forward into freedom by celebrating the freedom that Jesus brought for us with his blood.

See? The right party gets you closer to heaven. And it means you'll slot right in when you get there. So we move forward by celebrating our freedom.

Have you ever come across that idea that there's kind of an Old Testament God who's angry, generally, and likes a lot of rules? And then there's a New Testament God, mostly called Jesus, who's nice, and is more about grace and love.

Come across that? Well, if that's right, then this part of the Bible, there should be no hope for people who have blown it, right? You weren't there, you didn't do it, too bad.

But our passage says, yes, there is. Yes, there is hope for people who couldn't be there or who weren't there. There's grace here, isn't there?

[11:28] Let's look at verse 10. Tell the Israelites, And then verse 14.

So people who are off on their own journeys in the wilderness, wherever that may be.

People who didn't even belong to God's people. Are they welcome to the party? Yes, they are, says God. And so for someone who's thinking, I haven't done this faith stuff.

I haven't lived looking back at Jesus. I couldn't, because I wasn't here and I didn't know. And besides, you know, I've made a mess. I'm not clean. If you're asking me whether I'm clean, I know I'm not.

I was off on my own wanderings when you called God. I missed the invitation or I sent it back. Can I come? Am I welcome?

[12:43] And God says, yes, you are. How do we do this? How do we move forward by celebrating our freedom today?

Well, we celebrate every Sunday, don't we? And on some Sundays we celebrate communion, which is our Passover. So that's what we do.

But if you go to the New Testament, there's actually more. Here we are, 1 Corinthians 10. I don't want you to forget, dear brothers and sisters, about our ancestors in the wilderness long ago. Oh, see, we're in numbers.

All of them were guided by a cloud that moved ahead of them. And all of them walked through the sea on dry ground, crossing of the Red Sea. In the cloud and in the sea, all of them were baptized as followers of Moses. And all of them ate the same spiritual food as us.

And all of them drank the same spiritual water, for they drank from the spiritual rock that traveled with them. And that rock was Christ. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, our Passover, we are fed by him.

[13:53] So who is literally the life of the party? It's the Lord Jesus. So it's when we come to meet with him. That is when we celebrate.

That is how we move forward. He's the life. If you look at the Dutch party and the Swift gig, they're great, aren't they? But in a couple of years, the Dutch one will just be a statistic somewhere in a football database.

And Taylor Swift may not feel like it at the moment, but eventually, she's going to be superseded by the next big thing. Isn't she? We need more. We need more. So if you want to move forward, come to the party.

Come to the party where we look back to what Jesus has done for us, so that we can move forward to the party above. If you're in a state where you're stuck, or you're in a bad cycle, or a bad pattern, or you're really tired and you can't shake it, or you're in a relationship you can't change.

Whatever it is that means that you are stuck, don't skip church. You come. Because this is where God changes things.

[15:08] This is where God reminds us to look back to what Jesus did so we can move forward and not be stuck. Of course there's going to be times when you're not well enough to come to church.

Of course. But there will also be times when the fact that you're unwell is precisely why you should be in church, friend. Because we move forward by celebrating our freedom.

Because church is about remembering our rescue. Church is about second chances. About grace. And the other thing that we have to do if we're going to do this in practice is what the Lord does in this passage.

And that's extend the invitation to the party. Do you remember Abraham? He was going to be turned into a nation that would bless the whole world. And here it is. Here is the invitation to the Lord's celebration extended.

To foreigners, failures, strangers, sinners, because that's what we are. Now if you read chapter 10 in preparation for today, you'll know there's a great example of how to do this.

[16:15] Moses does it with Hobab. So if you turn to chapter 10, verse 32 really quickly. He tries to convince him. And he's already said no once. And here's what Moses follows up with, verse 32.

If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the Lord gives us. How about that? For a way to extend an invitation to other people.

Come with us. You will get a free share in the good that God gives. So move forward by celebrating our freedom.

Secondly, move forward by listening up. I was at Park Run a while ago with some friends. And actually, I bumped into Mike Hitchings, so we ran around together.

And the thing about Park Run is it's organized, isn't it? So you're at the starting line, and you wait for the go. And then you go. And there's a course marked out, isn't there?

[17:18] There are marshals that will help you with that, encourage you along the way, keep you on the course. What you don't do if you're going to Park Run is start before the starter says go, or just wander off on your own.

I mean, you could, but if you did, then you wouldn't be doing Park Run anymore, would you? And that's how it is with God's people. They move at the Lord's command.

That phrase occurs nine times in these two chapters. And what God is saying is, guys, move when I say so. One of the commentators says, following Jesus through the desert of life is not orienteering. It's not find your own way. It's a marathon with a course. You don't follow the course, just like Park Run. You don't wait for the starter's pistol. You get disqualified. You get disqualified. Another one of the commentators says it much more briefly.

He says, obedience is precise. That's not a very popular thing to say, is it? Obedience is precise. So we move forward by listening up to his voice.

[18:28] How does God give the signal? Flick back to chapter 9, verse 17 and 18. Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out.

Wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites set up camp. At the Lord's command, the Israelites set out. And at the Lord's command, they set up camp. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.

So how does God give the signal? Light. The movement of the shining cloud or the pillar of fire. That was the Israelite signal.

And also, through music. Because if you've read verse, chapter 10, then you'll realize that Moses was commanded to make two silver trumpets, which serve exactly the same function. At that musical call, people were to move and come into action.

So the signal is given by light and by music. And at the very end, there's a rhythm. There is a rhythm of Moses in the words that he says every time they break camp.

[19:32] And every time they set up camp again. Verse 35, chapter 10. Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, rise up, Lord. May your enemies be scattered. May your flows flee before you. And whenever it came to rest, he said, return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel.

First and last things they hear. And those signals are actually in themselves reminders of the God who is present with them. The cloud, the pillar that sits over the tent of meeting is a reminder of God's presence with them.

The trumpets go up like prayers before God, reminding them of God's presence with them. And the words of the blessing do the same, don't they?

Even more grace. We move forward by listening up. And that's how it is for us today. Let's go to the New Testament again. Matthew chapter 24. And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.

Talking about Jesus' return. And he will send out his angels with a mighty blast of a trumpet. And they will gather his chosen ones from all over the world. From the farthest ends of earth and heaven.

[20:47] See, Jesus is the one in the glory cloud. He's the one who comes when the trumpets sound. He's the first word and the last word. Jesus is the one who gives the command to move by

his spirit in the church.

And where can his voice be heard? Most clearly in the Bible. As John said, that's why we give the most time to the Bible, isn't it?

And Jesus' voice can also be heard through the music that we sing. And he can be heard as we pray. In a rhythm of life at the beginning of our services at the end. At the beginning of our days at the end.

During our meals. As we set out on a journey. As we come to rest. Praying that he will rise up and act when we get up. That he will give us rest when we stop to rest. Here we move to his beat.

This is a party. See? God is the DJ. He puts on the songs. And then the songs tell you. Whether it's a conga or a break dance or a headbang or whatever it is.

[21 : 53] He's the one that puts on the anthem. And when we hear it, we all know what it means, don't we? When the Macarena comes on. We know what that means. That's how it is to be for us spiritually. As well.

And it only works if you do it God's way. Otherwise you stick out like Michael Gove doing the dad dancing. Just take a moment to think about this.

Literally 30 seconds. Just to think about these questions. In your life. Do you move at the Lord's command? Have you made space in your life for that word?

The music. The rhythm. So that you can hear him. And are you completely dedicated to protecting that space? Come what may. So that when you move, it's because you've been listening up.

Just a few seconds to think about that. There are loads of signals about how and when to move in this world, aren't there?

[23 : 19] We're all following cues. Prompts. Virtue signals. The question is, will the ones that you are following lead you to a party that lasts forever?

Will they? If you don't belong to Jesus this morning, friend. Then don't wait for that final trumpet that Jesus speaks of.

Instead, when we sing our final song today, that is your cue. That is your cue. To come to Jesus.

And receive the forgiveness that the Passover lamb offers. And receive the joy that he brings.

And just imagine for a moment if we all did this. If we all listened to his voice. In the preaching. In the music. In the rhythm of our times with him. And we thought about our Sundays as a party that gets us one step closer to heaven.

What would that be like? I think it would be a bit like that video, wouldn't it? At its best.

[24 : 25] Video of the Dutch supporters dancing. Except with Jesus at the centre, it's never going to become a statistic. Or a faded fashion. It'll take root.

And grow. And become a forever kingdom. So if you're stuck. Remember that the way that we move forward. Even if we're in the wilderness.

Is by looking back. If we belong to Jesus. And listening for his voice when he speaks. Amen.