

Covenant reminders

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] So, that's the question. Why is this passage here? As far as we know, the Israelites are still at Kadesh Barnea.

! This may not be in the right place chronologically, it's there for structural reasons, but it does! talk about while they were in the desert, in the wilderness. So, as far as we know, this took place at Kadesh Barnea.

And why is this passage here? Did the writer wake up one morning and think, oh, I forgot to mention about the sacrifices, I'd better put it in now. Is it just an irrelevant digression between all this narrative of ups and downs, the marching and the rebellions and the battles?

On the face of it, it seems like a sudden change of focus, doesn't it? Suddenly a focus onto the ritual law, strangely inserted into the narrative of rebellion and defeat.

But it's worth remembering that Hebrew books are always carefully constructed. These passages are put here for a reason.

[1:19] And it comes towards the centre of the book, which is always an important place in Hebrew literature. And it is indeed sandwiched between the narratives of two major rebellions.

The rebellion after the report of the spies, as we looked at a couple of weeks ago and again this morning. And then Korah's rebellion in chapter 16. Why has it been exerted here?

If we skip over this, as I say, it's certainly tempting to do. We'll actually be missing something very important. Because this passage, and particularly the end of it, really summarises the focus and intent, I think, of the whole book.

Actually, the Jews understood this. Those last few verses, numbers 15, 37 to 41, is the last part of a Jewish prayer called the Shema, which is recited every morning and evening.

So it's not an irrelevant digression. But it might seem irrelevant, perhaps, or inappropriate for a different reason.

[2:29] The people had been told of a 40-year delay in entering the land. It wasn't going to happen now for another 40 years, for another generation. Yet verse 2 refers explicitly to entering the land.

In fact, the whole passage is about living in the land. One commentator sort of implies that the headings in our English translations are probably in the wrong place.

Because the text is actually really divided into three sections. Each is introduced by the phrase, the Lord said to Moses. And then a variation on the theme of when you're in the land or the generations to come.

You should do this. You see it in verses 1 and 2. Then again in verses 17 and 18. And then again in 37 and 38.

Excuse me. The phrase, the Lord said to Moses, does also occur in verse 35. But it doesn't seem to have the same structural force in this place.

[3:37] Why is the writer saying this now? Many of these provisions couldn't possibly be implemented in the desert, could they? There were grapes in Eshkol in the land, as the spies reported.

But you can't grow grapes in a desert. Grapes are very fussy about where you can grow them. You certainly can't grow them in a desert. But in fact, that seems to be the whole point.

What we have here actually is a series of three reminders for the future. An affirmation, as we might say, that the project is still on.

That the Lord hasn't abandoned it and gone over to plan B. That the Lord still intends to deliver the people into the land.

In fact, we have these three reminders that the covenant is still in place. And you'll notice, perhaps, in verse 2, it says that you will have a home.

[4:45] The meaning here seems to be almost more like the German *Heimat*, a homeland, a place where you can live and be at home. They don't have a home, do they?

They're stuck in a desert. They can't enter the promised land. Most of them have never even seen the promised land. And yet, the Lord says, you will have a home.

Verse 2. So, let's look at the passage under these three sections. First of all, there's a reminder that they inhabit the land under a tenancy, a covenant tenancy.

Because the land and its produce belong to the Lord. And then secondly, Moses deals with the problem of covenant slippage, as one might put it.

If things slip a little, if things go wrong, there is a way back. But it's contrasted with rebellion, outright and deliberate rebellion. Because from outright rebellion, there is no way back.

[5:58] And we find this in verses 17 to 36. And then, just at the end, we have these few verses about tassels. It seems an odd thing.

Even stranger, perhaps, than the rest of the passage. What on earth is this about tassels? Garments, fringes on your garment. And actually, however, it's clear that this is a covenant reminder.

That the heart of the covenant is the word and promise of the Lord. So, let's look at the passage under these three headings. So, we actually have here a brief summary of the main sacrifices.

But the emphasis here, certainly in this first part, is not so much on their ritual significance as on their content. This is a sacrificial system designed, obviously, for an agricultural economy.

Some of us still remember when we'd had harvest festivals. It don't really happen nowadays, at least not in the cities. But it was a system designed for an agricultural economy.

[7:11] It was to remind the people, firstly, that the fruits of the land belong to the Lord. And in this first section, we have the sacrifices made by fire, in verse 3.

And all these sacrifices involve an animal. Not all the sacrifices did, as, in fact, we see later in the next passage. But the emphasis here is not just on the animal, but on the whole range of produce. An animal is sacrificed for the blood, but it's accompanied by grain and wine. And the larger the animal, the more grain and wine are required to accompany it.

As we know from other passages, some of the sacrifices were destroyed completely. Others were given over in part or in whole to the provision for the priests.

But they all pointed to the fact that the people were not really the owners of the land, but tenants in the land. They were there by the grace of the Lord, as we'll see later in verse 41.

[8:20] And they were needing to make payment for the privilege of being there. They were tenants in the land. Now, we can look at this, I think, from various points of view.

Most of us are not farmers. In fact, as far as I know, none of us are farmers. But we are made to work, as Phil reminded us a few weeks ago. And if work is tainted by the fall, it's still a gift from God. Only a fraction of our economy, of course, is agricultural. And the New Testament reminds us that we are all recipients of grace. And that whatever we do, if we are his people, we do it for the Lord. Perhaps we can't bring sacrifices in exactly the same way that they did. But whatever we do, we're doing it for the Lord. And let me just remind you of those verses that we looked at a few weeks ago. Ephesians 6, verse 5 to 8. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

[9:29] Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.

Because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is a slave or free. So whatever work we're doing, Paul reminds us we're doing it actually for the Lord. And in a sense, we're bringing the first fruits to the Lord, even if we can't bring them as a sacrifice in quite the same way. But there's an important principle.

How can we be productive in our daily work? And yet not become obsessive and greedy over it. Well, this passage reminds us, doesn't it?

It reminds us that we are just tenant farmers. That we don't own the land, as it were. But we're put into this world to care for it, and yes, to work and be productive.

[10:34] But the first fruit belongs to the landlord. First fruit belongs to the Lord. So a first principle from this, I should think, is that whatever we're doing, we do need to remember that we do it as a tenant in the Lord's vineyard, as it were.

And that we're doing it for the Lord, not for our own prosperity in one sense. Of course, we should aim to be productive.

But we shouldn't become obsessed and greedy. But if we remember, we're tenant farmers, that the first fruit belongs to the Lord, or as the Lord Jesus said, seek first the kingdom of heaven, and other things will be added unto you as well.

Then we'll have a more healthy attitude to our daily work and our daily life. But still, I think there is another aspect to this.

I don't think we should completely ignore the details of these sacrifices. I don't think we should say, oh, we don't apply to us anymore because we're not farmers. Because, after all, we do all have to eat, don't we?

[11:48] We may not grow or catch our own food, but if we don't get our food, we die. And it's because of that, I think, that food becomes the symbol of spiritual life.

And these sacrifices, of course, did have a spiritual significance as well. And the thing we note from it is that the spiritual life requires a death.

Hebrews says that, doesn't it? It reminds us of that. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood. And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.

But here we're told that the sacrifice is not only blood. There are symbols, as we said, of the law's provision also in the grain and the wine. That's why I read those verses from Psalm 104.

Let me just read them to you again. He makes grass grow for cattle and plants for man to cultivate, bringing forth food from the earth, wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

[12:57] There is the bread and the wine. And yet this is the old covenant, isn't it? And yet these symbols point us forwards, don't they, to the new covenant, where there is an even closer link between the animal and the bread and the wine, between the death and the bread and the wine.

We no longer practice blood sacrifice, do we? Because the redemption price has been paid for us. It's the blood of Jesus Christ which cleanses us from all sin.

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. So when we keep the Passover, as it were, when we keep the Lord's Supper, it's entirely a sheep-free zone.

There is no sacrifice made. But we still retain the wine and the bread because the Lord himself told us that they point to the blood and perhaps wasn't clear in the original Old Testament sacrifices.

Remember what Jesus said. While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take it, this is my body.

[14:17] Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many, he said to them.

So in two ways, this first section reminds us that we are tenants in the land. What we do from the creation ordinance, where we were put in the world to look after it, we do to look after it for the Lord. But more than that, this blood that is shed is the blood of the covenant, the blood shed for sin, the blood shed for cleansing, and that when we take the bread and the wine, we are reminding ourselves that there is a lamb who has been slain.

And so actually the writer then moves on to this question of forgiveness.

The second section starts by kind of reaffirming the Lord's provision and the need to acknowledge it in verses 19 and 21 that provides a sort of link between the two parts of the chapter.

[15:35] And there it just talks about the grain and offering and so on. So it starts by reaffirming the Lord's provision and the need to acknowledge it.

But the main theme of this section is what to do when things go wrong. What to do when the covenant slips, when there is a problem. To err, we're told, is human. And here provision is made for human error. We need to notice in this passage from 17 to 36, though, that the two distinctions are made.

Firstly, there's a distinction between inadvertent failure and deliberate rebellion. And secondly, there's perhaps a slightly less obvious distinction, but one to notice between the community and the individual.

And the structure actually is a kind of sandwich, a kind of chiasm, although not quite a usual one. Because in verses 22 to 26, we start, in fact, with provision for error in the community.

[16:46] It's an interesting thing in itself, isn't it? Because we tend to start with the individual and move to the community. But the writer here does it the other way around. He starts with the community and then moves to the individual.

We do have a provision then for individual error in verses 27 to 29. And then in verses 30 to 31, we condemnation and contrast between error and defiant rebellion.

And then in verse 32, we have an example of individual defiance. And then finally, we go back to the community because it is the community as a whole that rejects that rebellion. We think of sin, don't we, as an individual thing.

But actually, sin is a covenant issue. And therefore, it's a community issue. It's the people together who are to be holy to the Lord.

[17:55] Sin affects the whole community. It's infectious. It contaminates. We can't think of sin as not affecting anyone else.

And if that's true in society as a whole, it's particularly true among God's people because sin leads to a despising of the covenant and leads, in fact, to a shared guilt in verse 26.

And yet there is also an acknowledgement here that starts with the individual and may be dealt with individually in verses 27 and 28. But we need to remind ourselves when things go wrong that we are responsible, yes, individually, but also as a community.

And perhaps we saw that in the previous chapter where the spies, in a sense, were individually responsible for causing the rebellion.

And yet it was the community as a whole which fell under judgment because they listened to the covenant breakers. But if there's a distinction made here between the individual and the community, obviously the more important distinction is the one between error and defiance.

[19:15] If there's repentance, then indeed there is a sacrifice and forgiveness. Verse 28 says that the person who makes the sacrifice will be forgiven.

It's unequivocal. Covenant fellowship can be restored. The individual and the people together can be restored if they put things right.

If they rely on the sacrifice. But of course, sacrifice has no power if it's not mixed with repentance. And that's the point of this passage because it then goes on to talk about an intentional, defiant rejection of covenant law.

Because from that, there is no way back. There is no forgiveness to be found. You notice it's stated twice to emphasize it in verses 30 and 31.

Those who defiantly reject God's law will only find condemnation. Defiance is to blaspheme the Lord and to despise his words.

[20:33] Then I think the next few verses need to be understood in this context. It seems a bit draconian, doesn't it?

Being stoned to death for Sabbath breaking. Again, I think in the later history, it wasn't usually the death penalty for things like Sabbath breaking. But I think we need to understand this in context. What is being portrayed here, I think, is a deliberate provocation, a deliberate rejection of the Lord and his law, a refusal to acknowledge him as creator.

Remember, the Sabbath was a creation ordinance. And ultimately, a defiant rejection of the covenant. Of course, the Lord has said, you should remember me on the Lord's day.

Yes, you need to be productive in the land, but you will only do that if you keep the Sabbath day holy. What is being, what we have here is a deliberate provocation.

[21:36] And we noticed here that the focus goes back to the community. Because like the spies' rebellion, this could become a focus for discontent.

This could be saying, oh, well, I don't care about the Lord. I just want to do my business on the Lord's day. But it could become a focus for discontent.

And hence, we're told that the method of execution is to be stoning, verse 35. I think we need to notice that.

We're not talking about a lynch mob here. There is a due process of law, as is implied in 33 to 35. There are witnesses and so on.

But when stoning is used, as it was sometimes in the Old Testament, you may have noticed in the previous chapters that the people threatened to stone Caleb and Joshua.

[22:48] because that's the community action. The community can't pass the buck. The whole community takes responsibility.

They either participate in the death directly or they reject it. You remember at the stoning of Stephen, we were told that Saul was there giving approval to his death, that particularly with this method of execution, then the whole community is involved.

And it was an opportunity, albeit a rather drastic one, for the whole community to reject rebellion, just as in the previous chapter, it had been an opportunity for the whole community to rebel as they threatened Caleb and Joshua.

Here, the opportunity is for the whole community, together, to reject that rebellion. I'm not necessarily recommending stoning as a method of execution or even necessarily the death penalty at all.

Of course, problems with the death penalty. But here, the people as a whole reject the covenant breaker. And so the covenant is affirmed. But at the same time, the difficulty is, of course, who is really fit to be the judge?

[24:15] And so Jesus was presented with an adulterous woman for stoning, wasn't he? You may be familiar with that story. Pharisees brought this woman who had been caught in the act of adultery.

Again, they were witnesses. And he brought the woman to Jesus for stoning. And yet, clearly, this penalty, which was the one in the law for adultery, had not been sort of kept up.

And what's Jesus' remark on this? He turns to them and says, if any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.

That is the problem with community, isn't it? With this stoning as a community activity, that all of us, in a sense, are guilty.

And only by acknowledging that we all sin is judgment possible. There is a sacrifice for sin. And there is a way back, as we've learned from verse 22 to 28.

[25:23] But this becomes a warning that we can reject that provision. Jesus said that all manner of sins will be forgiven.

But blasphemy against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. And this passage says very much the same thing. The true sin, the mortal sin, is not Sabbath-breaking or adultery or anything else that we might fall into.

It's despising the Lord's words. Verse 30. And so we move on to the third section. But we need to acknowledge the warning that there is, that without repentance, there is no sacrifice for sin.

But let's move on to this last bit. A covenant reminder. I don't know whether any of you have got tassels on your garment.

I don't think I've got any. They're decoration, aren't they? They're not vital to the function of the garment.

[26:52] In a sense, a fashion accessory. But here, this apparent piece of frippery is actually elevated to the status of a covenant marker, a covenant reminder.

A covenant reminder. It's something they will wear and look at every day as they put their coat on to go out. They'll see the tassels.

And the tassels, we're told, had a blue thread. Probably this blue signified the presence of God. The wrapping of the Ark of the Covenant was blue, as we say in Numbers 4, verse 6.

And the blue thread was worked into the tabernacle curtains. Exodus 26, 31. It says that, although there were other threads as well, but one of the threads was a blue one.

And perhaps the suggestion is they would carry a small token of the tabernacle of the temple, the meeting place of the Lord. They would carry it around with them wherever they went to remind them that they were the Lord's people.

[28:09] They were a people focused on the presence of the Lord. Just as we might nowadays carry a locket or a ring to remind us of a loved one.

Then that was to remind them of the presence of the Lord. Such things can become familiar and lose their significance.

But they weren't to do that. Every time they saw it, they were told to think of the words of the Lord. But still, it was just a reminder, wasn't it?

And all said and done. It was just a fringe. It's what it was pointed to that was important. The commands of the Lord in verse 39 and 40.

They were tempted. Perhaps they might be tempted by the lust of their own hearts and eyes. So from that point of view, it's perhaps a good reminder.

[29:10] It's a decoration on their clothes. This might appeal to the heart. And it's a thing they would see and look at. And it was a reminder to their eyes. They were supposed to see the tassel and they were supposed to pause and think.

That's why it was there. Why did the Lord, why did Moses choose this particular reminder? Well, I think it is because we're going to see it every day.

And in those days, remember, it wasn't really practicable to carry the law around with you, was it? Not everyone could read for a start.

And even if you could read, scrolls were big, heavy things. They were easily damaged. They were expensive. And just not things that you wanted to carry around with you while you were ploughing a field or threshing the corn.

But actually, now, we have some technical progress, don't we? And now, it's perfectly possible to carry around with you not just a reminder of the word of the Lord, but the word of the Lord itself.

[30:25] You can carry it as a small book or in your phone or on your iPad or computer. So in a sense, we don't need the reminder. We can carry the thing itself, the word of the Lord, around with us.

Why not make sure that you do that? You always have it to hand wherever you go. But still, if it stays in your pocket, it's not going to do you a lot of good.

It's no more use than that tasseled garment if they left it in the wardrobe. It's really about the heart and the mind and the eyes.

To be consecrated to God, you don't just need to remember his commands, but you need to obey them. We were thinking of that with Chris this morning, weren't we?

But we need to be reminded of that again. It isn't just a matter of reading them, but we need to think about them.

[31:27] When they saw the tassels, they were meant to think and meditate on the word of the Lord. But then one might say, well, why do you want to do that?

Why would you want to do that? Well, the passage goes on to remind us that it's because the Lord is in the business of salvation. That's what the covenant is about.

That's why they need a covenant reminder. And in verse 41, as I say, we have this verse that forms the whole part of the Shema.

In a sense, it sums up in one verse the theme and the center of the book of Numbers. It's like Aaron's blessing in chapter 6.

It puts the emphasis on the Lord's grace. But here, it's even more terse. You might indeed struggle to remember all those commandments in detail.

[32:30] That's why you may need a sacrifice if you forget. But if you can't remember all of them in detail, you can certainly remember this. Usually, as we've already seen, in Hebrew poetry, and if things are important, they're repeated twice.

Twice, sorry. But when you repeat something three times, it means it's especially important. Something we're supposed to take special notice.

Exodus 6, verse 7, says very much the same thing, but not in this epigrammic form. It's a bit like a haiku. I mean, it's not the structure of a haiku, but it's the same idea.

You say in very terse form, in very short number of words, such an important principle. So what does it actually say?

I've spread it out there on the screen to emphasize the repetition, the bit that is repeated.

[33:36] It doesn't actually say, I am the Lord, it just says, I the Lord. It says, I Yahweh. And what does it say? It says, I Yahweh, your God, brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.

I, Yahweh, your God. Our God is in the business of rescue, but not just to save us from slavery. In fact, Exodus 6, verse 7, says the following, I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. So I say, it's very much the same thing. But even that might be a bit long to stick in the mind.

But I, the Lord, your God, brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I, the Lord, your God. You're not going to forget that, are you?

And that's what they were supposed to remember. So what do we make of this passage? I say there is a reason that it's here in the center of the book, in between these two stories of rebellion, places and narratives where it seems it's all gone wrong, it's all hopeless, it's never going to happen, where the Lord even threatens him to give up and try again with Moses.

[35:17] But, of course, Moses' prayer, remember, in the previous chapter says, if you do that, then the people of the land will say the Lord cannot save. And so, the Lord reminds them here that he is their God and that if they slip, there is a way back, there is forgiveness to be found, but not if they're defiantly rebellious.

From that only comes judgment. We're all human, we're all sons of Adam, we're all daughters of Eve, as such, we all sin, we all disobey God's word, and as the Apostle John reminds us, if we pretend otherwise, we're believing a lie.

But, the fact that we're all sinners doesn't mean we have to be rebellious, because there is forgiveness available, verse 28. Through the blood of Jesus, the covenant can be restored.

And notice what's repeated there, it's not even the name of the Lord, you might have expected perhaps that the name of the Lord would be what was repeated three times, but the name of the Lord is only repeated twice.

What is repeated three times is that he is to be your God, not just the God of the people in principle, not just a God, not even just the God, but your God.

[36:58] And he, for those who seek him, he is my God. So that is the real challenge this evening.

It's not enough just to say that the Lord is God. God. Can we say he is my God? How can we say that?

Well, we can say that if he's brought us out of the land of slavery, if the sacrifice of Jesus' blood is applied to us through repentance and faith.

faith. And then we can indeed say, not just the Lord is God, but the Lord is my God. But this passage also has that warning, doesn't it?

Those who despise the Lord's word, guilt and destruction remain. So next, it goes back to the bad news, another rebellion, and we'll look at that.

[38:05] But let's remember now that if we've been brought out of slavery, and that's the business the Lord is in, then we can indeed say, the Lord is my God.

So let's remind ourselves of that and let's covenant reminder by singing a hymn about the covenant, 274.