

God's purposeful leading

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[0 : 00] The first reading this morning comes from Numbers chapter 9 and we're going to do verses 1 to 14 which you'll find on page 140.

And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt saying, Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time.

On the fourteenth day of this month at twilight you shall keep it at its appointed time. According to all its statutes and all its rules you shall keep it.

So Moses told the people of Israel that they should keep the Passover. And they kept the Passover in the first month on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight in the wilderness of Sinai.

According to all the Lord commanded Moses so the people of Israel did. And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body so that they could not keep the Passover on that day.

[1 : 03] And they came before Moses and Aaron on that day. And those men said to him, We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel?

And Moses said to them, Wait, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the people of Israel saying, If any one of you or your descendants is unclean through touching a dead body or is on a long journey, he shall still keep the Passover to the Lord.

In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight they shall keep it. They shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They shall leave none of it until the morning nor break any of its bones.

According to all the statute for the Passover they shall keep it. But if anyone who is clean and is not on a journey fails to keep the Passover, that person shall be cut off from his people because he did not bring the Lord's offering at its appointed time.

That man shall bear his sin. And if a stranger sojourns among you and would keep the Passover to the Lord according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do.

[2 : 21] You shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native. Our reading continues in Numbers 9, starting to read at verse 15.

And you'll find that on page 141 in the Bibles. Verse 15. On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony.

And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always. The cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night.

And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out. And in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

At the command of the Lord, the people of Israel set out. And at the command of the Lord, they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.

- [3 : 38] Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle for many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.
- Sometimes the cloud would remain for a few days over the tabernacle. And according to the command of the Lord, they remained in camp. Then according to the command of the Lord, they set out.
- And sometimes the cloud remained from evening till morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted, they set out.
- Whether it was two days or a month or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out.
- But when it lifted, they set out. At the command of the Lord, they camped. And at the command of the Lord, they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord at the command of the Lord by Moses.
- [4 : 44] Thanks very much for reading, Andrew. For those who don't know me, my name is Benji. I'm on the staff here. It's worth saying, just before we kick off, that we are in this sermon covering Numbers 9 all the way through to 10, verse 10.
- So do keep that open in front of you because we will be referring to verses from all of it. And there is a handout on the back where it will be kind of showing us where we're going. And that will be very useful for our time together.
- Why don't I pray as we start? Amen. Father in heaven, we come before you with the weight of this broken world on our shoulders in a variety of different ways.
- Some in suffering, some in longing, some in ambivalence, some in brokenness. Lord, please would you move all the things that are in between us and hearing your word aright this morning to one side.
- Please prepare our hearts to hear what you have to say. And please would we love the Lord Jesus Christ far more from having seen your precious word this morning than we did when we arrived.
- [5 : 55] And we ask this in your precious son's name. Amen. The wilderness throws up a lot of questions. Being in a broken world that we're in, it throws up a lot of questions.
- And we'll all have, all of us here, friends and family who were at one point going well with the Lord and have since fallen away. For myself, this is very painful as I was preparing this.
- Two of my closest friends from youth group all the way through from 11 to 21 are now no longer going with the Lord. And all of us will have stories like that if we've been a Christian for any length of time whatsoever.
- But of course, seeing that then turns the lens onto ourself, doesn't it? And makes us contemplate how we can make sure that that is not us. If it can happen to them, can it happen to us?
- And many of us will experience this world and find it difficult, whether it's through loss and suffering or God feeling absent and dry or other Christians feeling difficult.
- [7 : 02] There'll be a whole variety of reasons why being a Christian in this wilderness throws up a lot of questions. And therefore, because of that, we all long for heaven for a variety of different reasons.
- I had the great privilege of praying with a lady called Jean who lives at the Elms where we have our older people's ministry just before she passed away. And the last thing that she left me with was that she was saying that she longs for heaven because she wants to see the face of Jesus.

And she had absolute certainty that she would see him. And I suppose I think that is what the book of Numbers would want for us this morning, to have certainty about where we are going and God's ability to bring us there.

In other words, then, what needs to fill our minds as Christians so that we keep going? The wilderness feels hard and confusing at times.

And obedience to God, which we're encouraged to do, can feel painful and pointless at times and makes no sense. How do we keep going? What perspective do we need when the wilderness throws up questions?

[8 : 14] Now, this is the question of the whole of these first 10 chapters of Numbers. Now, for those of us who haven't been with us during this series, the first 10 chapters basically all happened before the wilderness generation set out.

And I think, you know, a helpful way of thinking about this is I'm sure lots of us here are power lifters or love to lift weights. Okay, I can see it in our faces here this morning. And what happens is I've been told before you lift some really heavy weight is you take some smelling salts and it gets your mind focused.

And then, I don't know, another very large man hits you on the back just to get you amped. It's like a preparation before you're about to engage in this very difficult activity. And just like that, not just like that, but just like that, these first 10 chapters of Numbers are preparing God's people before they set out on their difficult journey.

What do they need to hear from God before the wilderness throws up questions for them? What do they need to hear? And Moses has saved these chapters that we're in this morning to the very end.

Have a look with me at chapter 9, verse 1. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they come out of the land of Egypt.

[9 : 27] And if we just compare that to where our books, these 10 chapters started, Numbers chapter 1, verse 1. Flick back with me to Numbers chapter 1, verse 1. The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the tent of meeting on the first day of the second month in the second year after they come out of the land of Egypt.

In other words, these verses, these chapters that were in 9 and 10, actually happened a month before Numbers chapter 1. So Moses has deliberately twisted the chronology to make sure that these chapters are right at the end.

The last thing ringing in the Israelites' ears as they set off on their journey into the promised land. This is kind of like the final rallying cry, the final sniff of the smelling salts, I suppose, before they set off on their journey.

And what Moses wants to give them is a perspective. A perspective. Now, I've made this up, so this might not be true, but I believe that a perspective has three elements. Past, present, future.

And what we're going to see, as you can see on our handout in our three points, is that's exactly where Moses takes the people of Israel to give them this kind of smelling salt sniff before they walk out into the wilderness.

[10 : 48] So we begin with past perspective, which is the first point on our handout. Past perspective. God's proven grace. God's proven grace.

God's proven grace.

And on. It's so hard. And so Moses begins his final rallying call before that gruelling journey begins by enforcing the people to look back and remember the saving grace of God.

Why? So that you trust him as he asks you to step forward. Have a look with me at chapter 9, verses 1 to 5. And the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai in the first month of the second year after they come out of the land of Egypt saying, Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time.

On the 14th day of this month at twilight you shall keep it as its appointed time. According to all its statutes and all its rules you shall keep it. So Moses told the people of Israel that they should keep the Passover.

[12 : 24] And they kept the Passover in the first month on the 14th day of the month at twilight in the wilderness of Sinai according to all that the Lord commanded Moses. So the people of Israel did.

Kept, keep, keep, keep, kept. Over and over and over again. You are to keep it. Three things to note from these verses. First, this isn't optional. I wonder if we notice that in the verses.

You are to keep it. It is a command from the Lord. Verse 2. Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time.

This is not optional. Second thing to notice. Everyone has to keep it. Everyone has to keep it. Verse 2. Let the people of Israel collective.

Verse 5. And they kept the Passover in the first month on the 14th day of the month at twilight in the wilderness of Sinai according to all the Lord commanded Moses. So the people of Israel did.

[13 : 23] You must keep it. Everyone must keep it. And finally, third. This is worship. So everyone has to observe it correctly.

I wonder if we notice the kind of almost overwhelming detail just in these few short verses. Verse 2. Verse 3, sorry. On the 14th day of this month at twilight you shall keep it at its appointed time according to all its statutes and all its rules.

You shall keep it. You shall keep it. The point is clear. Moses is making absolutely sure that the final thing that you have ringing in your ears Israelites as you step out into the wilderness is that you must look back rightly, correctly, collectively and worship.

And of course the thing that they are looking back to is the Passover. And the Passover is the perfect act of worship to remember as the Israelites walk out into the wilderness.

It is the defining event of God's salvation and grace. It calls to mind the power of God in the plagues and the Red Sea. The salvation of God in bringing that same sea crashing down on Israelites enemies, Israel's enemies.

[14 : 44] The faithfulness of God that he took a people out of slavery and took them to salvation. The holiness of God that there was a blood of the Lamb slain for every firstborn son.

Before the assault of the wilderness begins, the Lord wants his people to remember every man, woman and child in worship the acts of the one true God.

And notice that it really is everyone. Did we see that? So verse 6, look back down with me. And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body so that they could not keep the Passover on that day.

And they came before Moses and Aaron on that day and those men said to him, We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel?

And this is a real problem. If the command is that all of Israel must remember, must remember and worship the one true God for what he's done for them in history, it's a real problem if you can't come before him and are unclean.

[15 : 47] How are they going to keep it? Well, we get a Mark 2 Passover. Verse 9, In other words, In other words, In other words, In other words, In other words, Even in the way in which God has set up the Passover commands, God's grace is shot through.

Even if you're unclean, He will still find a way for you to remember and to worship. Now, of course, though, we do this every year as well.

I wonder as we were hearing the word remember, remember, remember, coming up and up and again, maybe the nursery rhyme, remember, remember the 5th of November might have come up. But even more pertinently, we enact the past every year.

We stand and we observe a minute's silence together. We remember soldiers' sacrifice for freedom and democracy. And we enact that remembrance every single year with a service of remembrance to inform our present.

We even call it Remembrance Day. Bit on the nose, but it's making the point, isn't it? And the whole reason of Remembrance Day, fundamentally, is to remember the sacrifice in the past to inform the future.

[17 : 24] We're used to thinking about remembering in that way. But, of course, we have an even better example of this as Christians. And we're going to be celebrating it actually together later today.

The Passover was a great feast. And we have a feast too. Just like, as we call it, communion. It's such a powerful idea, communion, that I fear that we have somewhat lost the weight of it because of how it's being abused by other denominations and teachings.

But I want us to think how intimate and visceral communion is. It's not just an act of remembering that is just cognitive up here. Just like the Passover wasn't an act of remembering that was just cognitive up here.

But we are holding, eating, drinking, taking into ourselves the representation of Jesus himself. It is visceral.

It involves mind and body. I'm not saying that there is some kind of special spirituality that is occurring when you eat it. There's not. But it isn't a surprise that Jesus wants us to not only enact in our minds what he has done on the cross, but in our bodies as well.

[18 : 42] So the first thing that Moses wants them to reflect on, the first thing that Moses wants us to reflect on, is what God has done in the past. God's proven grace.

And we move on to my second point. We've looked at the past perspective. We're now going to look at the now perspective. Obedience is guidance. Obedience is guidance.

Moses moves from looking at the past to looking at the present. And this is chapter 9, verses 15 to 23. And he wants to leave us with absolutely no doubt that the present is to be entirely dictated, entirely dictated by obedience to God.

Now we know, if we've been here for a few weeks, that Numbers isn't afraid of repetition. And Moses uses it here to drive home who the Israelites are to be obedient to.

Have a look with me, starting from verse 17. And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out. And in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

[19 : 48] At the command of the Lord, the people of Israel set out. And at the command of the Lord, they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.

Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle. And according to the command of the Lord, they remained in camp. Then according to the command of the Lord, they set out. And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning.

And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out. Or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted, they set out. Whether it was two days or a month or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and they did not set out.

But when it lifted, they set out. At the command of the Lord, they camped. And at the command of the Lord, they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord at the command of the Lord by Moses.

Nine times in those verses. The command of the Lord, the charge of the Lord. It's, yeah, gosh, he really drives home his point, doesn't it? So obviously, Moses doesn't want us to miss that before the journey has begun, before we step out into the wilderness, every single step of the journey is to be followed obediently.

[21 : 13] But notice, obedience is going to throw up more questions. I wonder if we notice that in verse 19. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out.

Verse 21, and sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. Verse 22, whether it was two days or a month or a longer time that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp.

In other words, sometimes the people didn't move for months. The cloud was just there over the tabernacle. God's presence was just there, not moving. No explanation.

No reason given. You're not to move until God moves. Nowhere does God give an explanation, and nowhere does he suggest a lack of an explanation on his part should lead to questioning his obedience.

Precise obedience to God is the only way to also then have his guidance and safety in the wilderness. Now, I want us to imagine that you've got a really sore knee, okay?

[22 : 27] And you go into hospital, and the doctor says, I'm really sorry, it's terminal, unless we amputate your leg, okay? And you think, hmm, what's the prognosis looking like?

Well, it's going to be six months to get ready for the operation. You know, you need to really strengthen it up. You need to be eating the right diet. You need to lose a bit of weight, sad to say, before we can operate on you. And then it's going to be about a year to 18 months recovery.

Afterwards, it's going to be very painful, very expensive. But if we do it this way, and if you listen to my commands absolutely, you won't, you'll be fine afterwards. You pause and you think, do I really want to, hmm, that sounds quite difficult.

But then you walk past somebody else, Swindler Steve, and you walk up to Swindler Steve, and Swindler Steve says, oh, I can do this for you. I just need a penknife, 15 minutes of your time, and 20 quid, let's say.

20 quid, and it'll be absolutely sorted. Now, of course, it's a ridiculous example, but we would choose the option that even if it's harder to obey, obviously the choice is hopefully to go with the first and not with Swindler Steve.

[23 : 32] One of my favorite missionaries was a guy called Paul Washer, who spent 30 years in the jungle of Peru. He's a very alpha male type. He likes to shoot things with a bow and stuff like that. And he would often get young men coming up to him and asking, oh, how did you do it?

Fighting through the wilderness, fighting through the jungle. And his answer was, I did nothing other than follow the guide in front of me. I did nothing but follow the guide in front of me.

If he said, run up a tree, I didn't wait to find out why. I ran up the tree in the forest. So, of course, obedience might throw up questions. It might be difficult.

But in the wilderness, in the struggles and ups and downs of our life, knowing what God has done for us in the past, I hope gives us the confidence that we can trust God and obey him in the present.

Now, this has come to home in our own denomination in a very painful way. Many of us would have seen in the last few weeks that the Church of England's House of Bishops has decided to tell us their opinion on whether or not we should bless same-sex marriage.

[24 : 36] And, quote, they've said that because people in today's society inhabit their relationships differently, we need to change what the Bible says, ultimately, on whether or not God approves of sex outside of marriage and same-sex marriage.

They've got a choice, haven't they? Am I going to obey the Word of God, even though it seems hard in the wilderness, and I'll receive hate and persecution for it? Or am I going to capitulate in the wilderness and obey the culture?

Can you see? It is very real to us whether or not, even when it's difficult, am I going to keep on trusting what the Bible says and what God has told me? Obedience is guidance.

I think this is vital for us as a group. Our society is obsessed with seeking guidance. But for us, in the midst of when things are difficult, Moses wants to make absolutely clear that if you want to get to the end, even if it throws up more questions, keep obeying the God who has proven his past grace to you.

That is the now perspective. Finally, we come to future perspective, which is 10, 1 to 10, the verses that we didn't have read, so concentrate with me until the end. God's provision will bring us home.

[25 : 54] God's provision will bring us home. Perspective, as we've said, requires looking at the past, present, and future correctly. And here, having covered the past and the present, God turns to focus on assuring them, the Israelites, of their future.

Have a look with me at 10, verses 1 to 7. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Make two silver trumpets of hammered work. You shall make them, and you shall use them for summoning a congregation and for breaking camp.

And when both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the entrance of the tent of meeting. But if they blow only one, then the chiefs, the heads of the tribes of Israel shall gather themselves to you.

When you blow an alarm, the camps that are on the east side shall set out. And when you blow an alarm the second time, the camps that are on the south side shall set out. An alarm is to be blown wherever they are to set out.

But when the assembly is to be gathered together, you shall blow a long blast, but you shall not sound an alarm. This looks like a future continuation of obedience that we've been seeing.

[27 : 05] Basically, this is like the big alarm system of when you ought to move. But the Lord clarifies the purpose of these trumpets in verses 8 to 9. Have a look with me. And the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets.

The trumpet shall be to you for a perpetual statute throughout your generations. And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, that you may be remembered before the Lord your God, and you shall be saved from your enemies.

These trumpets are to be used from now on as a gracious provision from the Lord. But especially, they are to be used, verse 9, in your land.

The land that they are not currently in. The land that they haven't actually set out to yet. In other words, the question, as far as God is concerned, of whether Israel will make it to the promised land isn't even in doubt.

It is so certain that before the journey even begins, God establishes generational practices for them to follow once they are there.

[28 : 17] These trumpets are a guarantee. Every time they hear them, every time they set out from the camp, it is a reassurance from God. I'm leading you home. I'm leading you home.

I'm leading you home. Of course, again, I think we are used to thinking in these terms, I hope. So all of us here that work in a job, I want you to imagine that your boss comes up to you, you've just been paid, and he or she says, we're trying this new thing.

We think it's going to be amazing, where you're not going to be sure that we're going to pay you at the end of the month. Okay? Off you go. Now, how are you then going to view your job?

It's kind of 50, and then you go back to your boss, you say, what likelihood am I going to get paid? Maybe 50-50, maybe 25-75. Don't know. We're just going to toss a coin and see.

Very difficult, I would imagine, for you to motivate yourself to keep cracking on hard at work if you're not sure what's going to come at the end of the month in your paycheck. For those of us, I've discovered, to my horror, that some of us have run a marathon recently, which makes me feel thoroughly inadequate, I want you to imagine that you're on the start race of the marathon, and the organizer of the race comes up to you and says, just so you know, the race might end at 26 miles.

[29 : 39] We might elongate it to 45. We're not sure. Have fun. Would you then set out on that race? Or for those of us who are about to start an exam, and you think you walk into the exam hall, and you think you're about to do an exam in English literature, and the examiner stands up and says, just so you know, we have no idea what's on this paper.

Once you turn it over, there's a very good chance it's astrophysics. Good luck. None of us operate this way. We all work and do things and think of things in relation to our certainty about the future.

And of course, it is exactly the same with God. As I've been mentioning, the wilderness throws up a lot of questions. Questions that might make us question our belief and our willingness to obey God in the wilderness.

If there was an absolute certainty from God about the future, the wilderness would be unbearable with the questions that it throws up. But that isn't what God has said to us.

God's promise of the new creation, of the promised land for us, is so certain, so completely out of the question that it won't happen, that like Israel, we can make decisions now knowing exactly what the future is going to be.

[31 : 04] To conclude, we've been saying the wilderness throws up a lot of questions. And Moses wants to equip the Israelites, he wants to give them a good old sniff of smelling salts, with an ironclad perspective that God has done everything, past, present, future, to ensure that they will make it through the wilderness to the promised land.

He reminds them and enforces them to physically remember the salvation and power and glory of God. He shows them everything they have to do in the wilderness.

Obey him. The cloud is literally in front of them. All you have to do is one step in front of the other, keep going. That's it. And he's promised them, he's promised them that they will make it home.

He's promised them. Of course, we're also in the same position in many ways. The wilderness throws up many questions for us in this room, many questions about God's goodness, about whether I want to keep following him.

I remember I was having one chat with a lady in our congregation a few weeks ago who said, sometimes I really do think is it worth keeping on going? I think that's a question that we can all empathize with.

[32 : 20] Is it really worth it? Is obedience to him really the answer? Perhaps somebody else has a better one. We need to have confidence that God has done everything in the past, that he'll guide us in the future and that heaven is certain to make sure that we get there.

To close, I want us to imagine a gallery and you've arrived at the gallery. It's this really exciting thing. You know, you've got your app of Time Out London or whatever the case may be and this new exhibition comes up and it says, new artist, Yahweh.

And Yahweh is, that's God. God has decided to put on an art show for us. He does that every time we walk out of our house. But anyway, he's decided to put on an art show for us and it's chronological. Okay?

So, you walk into the first gallery and it says, God's power in creation. You look around and there's a nice painting on the wall of the stars in the sky. And God has not only done the painting, he's put the stars in the sky.

And then you look to the right and you kind of see the space, infinite space, and then the world is a tiny speck in it. God holds that in his hands. That's God's power in creation.

[33 : 31] And then you move into the next gallery, it's chronological, and this one is called God's power in the Old Testament. And you look to the left and you see the waves of the Red Sea being split in half and the Israelites safely being carried through.

And then you look to the right and you see the Assyrians being destroyed with a single prayer. And you think, goodness, what a powerful God. Then you move through to the third and penultimate gallery and it says above the lintel, God's power in the New Testament.

And there's only one, two paintings again in this room. On the left, the Lord Jesus Christ nailed to a tree. And on the right, an empty tomb. And then you notice that in front of you, there is a final gallery.

And above this, there's a kind of, there's a block to the gallery door. You can't go in yet. And above this lintel, it says, God's future glory. God's future creation.

And the little plaque that you read on the front says, soon to be opened. Soon to be opened. And you think to yourself, have I got the confidence of looking back at what the one true God has done, that I'm happy to stand here and wait until that opens?

[34 : 45] I hope that the answer would be yes. If God has been so consistent, so powerful since the dawn of time, to bring us, to bring us all the way to this point through the death and resurrection of his son, we can have absolute certainty that in the wilderness, he, through his son, will bring us home.

Why don't I lead us in a final prayer? Father, I thank you that at every single step from the moment that you spoke creation into existence to this morning, you have been faithful to your word.

I thank you that you are a God that we can trust. I thank you that you are a God who has guaranteed our future. Please, Father, help us to live now in obedience to the one true God who has done everything past and will do everything for us in the future.

Amen.