

God's Forgiven People

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[0 : 00] And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel, if any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected, though she has defiled herself, and there are no witnesses against her, since she was not taken in the act.

And if the spirit of jealousy comes over him, and he is jealous of his wife, who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him, and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, then the man shall bring his wife to the priest, and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephah of barley flour.

He shall pour no oil on it, and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance.

And the priest shall bring her near, and set her before the Lord, and the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel, and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle, and put it into the water.

And the priest shall set the water of bitterness, and the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness, while you are under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse.

[1 : 59] But if you have gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you, then let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman, the Lord make you a curse, and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your thigh fall away, and your body swell.

May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels, and make your womb swell, and your thigh fall away. And the woman shall say, Amen. Amen.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel.

You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle, and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings, and had anointed and consecrated the altar with all its utensils, the chiefs of Israel, heads of their fathers' houses, who were the chiefs of the tribes, who were over those who were listed, approached, and brought their offerings before the Lord.

[3 : 44] Six wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon for every two of the chiefs, and for each one an ox. They brought them before the tabernacle.

Then the Lord said to Moses, Accept these from them, that they may be used in the service of the tent of meeting, and give them to the Levites, to each man according to his service.

This was the dedication offering for the altar on the day when it was anointed, from the chiefs of Israel. Twelve silver plates, twelve silver basins, twelve golden dishes, each silver plate weighing 130 shekels, and each basin 70.

All the silver of the vessels, 2,400 shekels according to the shekel of the sanctuary. The twelve golden dishes, full of incense, weighing ten shekels apiece according to the shekel of the sanctuary. All the gold of the dishes being 120 shekels. All the cattle for the burnt offering, twelve bulls, twelve rams, twelve male lambs a year old, with their grain offering, and twelve male goats for a sin offering.

[5 : 08] And all the cattle for the sacrifice of peace offerings, twenty-four bulls, the rams 60, the male goats 60, the male lambs a year old 60.

This was the dedication offering for the altar after it was anointed. And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim, and it spoke to him. Now, I wonder how you self-identify. Now, I don't mean in that sense, but rather in the sense of, kind of generally, how do you think of yourself?

How do you, you know, what kind of person are you? Perhaps your identity is very much in the stage of life you're at. You're a teenager, or you're retired.

Perhaps your identity is tied up in your work, and you think of yourself as a teacher, or a builder, or you're in financial services, or whatever it is.

[6 : 18] Perhaps your identity is more in the fact that you're a parent, you're a mum, or you're a dad. That is the thing that matters to you most. Or perhaps in your social life, and being well connected.

Well, as John said, we're continuing our sermon series in the book of Numbers. So far, God has been teaching us who he is. Now, in chapters 5 to 8, the focus switches to God's people, and who they are.

Because it's vital that they grasp their identity, if they're to make it to the promised land. And it's just the same if we are followers of Jesus Christ. If we're to keep going to the new creation, we need to be clear who we are.

And if you're here this morning, and you're looking in on the Christian faith, although those readings which we have from Numbers 5 to 8 may have sounded to us very obscure, I hope actually what we'll discover is that this is a glorious breath of fresh air, and that you'll go away seeing what a blessing it is to know Jesus.

That's a big chunk. We haven't obviously read all of it. And yet these four chapters, chapters 5 to 8, they really fit together as a kind of sandwich. And the filling of the sandwich, so to speak, is in chapter 6, verses 22 to 27, the blessing, perhaps the most well-known, the most often-read verses in the book of Numbers.

[7 : 48] And then the kind of, the bread, so to speak, is the two bigger sections either side. So what we're going to do this morning, we're going to look at the two bigger sections first, and then we'll finish with the filling in the middle.

And you'll see there's an outline on the service sheet, which will also come up on the screen as well. So firstly, God's people are a set-apart people. And we see that in chapters 5 and 6.

God's people are a set-apart people. Last week we saw that God's people were a redeemed people, a rescued people. There had been, if you remember, a change of ownership. Rescued from slavery in Egypt.

Rescued no longer to serve Pharaoh, but instead to serve the living God. And that is reflected now in chapters 5 and 6, where we see that God's people are set-apart.

Chapter 5 is all about the seriousness of sin and the need for purity amongst God's people. In verses 1 to 4, firstly, purity in the camp.

[8 : 53] Those who are unclean are to be put outside the camp so that it's not defiled. Have a look at verses 1 to 4. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead.

You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile the camp in the midst of which I dwell. And the people of Israel did so and put them outside the camp. As the Lord said to Moses, so the people of Israel did. Now, why is purity, this whole question of ritual purity, why is it such a big deal?

Well, I wonder if you spotted it. Verse 3, that they may not defile the camp in the midst of which I dwell. It is because God dwells amongst his people.

Verses 5 to 10, they are all about purity in relationships. Because sin is both sin against the Lord, in other words, it has a kind of vertical dimension, but it is also sin against each other.

[10 : 07] There is a horizontal dimension. That is clear in verses 6 and 7. Speak to the people of Israel when a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord.

And that person realises his guilt. He shall confess his sins that he has committed. And he shall make restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.

It's the principle of restitution, of making good any harm that is being done. And then in verses 11 to 13, this longer section, purity in marriage, how to deal with an accusation of adultery.

Either verse 13, where the wife is guilty, but she wasn't caught in the act and so there's no evidence. Or end of verse 14, where she's innocent, but a jealous husband is making accusations against her.

Now we're going to spend a little bit more time on this one because at first sight, it reads like a kind of medieval trial by ordeal. The kind of thing which certainly I and perhaps others remember learning about in their history lessons at school where someone suspected of being a witch, she'd be tied to a chair, she'd be dunked in a river, and if she drowned in the river, then it was assumed that she was innocent because God was happy to receive her.

[11:38] If she survived the drowning experience, then it was assumed that she was guilty and therefore she would be killed. And you think to yourself, well hang on a moment, there's not very much justice in that.

Well numbers could not be more different, numbers chapter 5, because it is both taking sin seriously and it's also about the protection of the wife from unjust accusation.

Let's look at the process. Verse 15, have a look at it, she's brought before the priest. In other words, justice isn't kind of left in the hands of the husband or of the wider extended family.

In verse 16, the priest brings her before the Lord. That is then emphasised again in verse 18 and in verse 30. She then drinks this mixture of water and dust from the floor of the tabernacle.

If she's innocent, nothing happens to her. If she's guilty, then she receives the Lord's punishment, which is that she won't be able to bear any more children.

[12:49] Verse 22. Now, it's obviously very far removed, isn't it, from 21st century London. But I wonder if we can see the principle. It is both about protecting the innocent and also dealing with the guilty.

There's no presumption of guilt. Justice is taken out of the hands of husband and extended family. It's a process the woman agrees to voluntarily.

So that's chapter 5. Purity in the camp, purity in relationships, purity within marriage, all because God's people are a set-apart people.

Chapter 6 makes the same point, but in a different way. It's a chapter about a vow that anyone could take in order to separate themselves to the Lord for a specific period of time.

Have a look at chapter 6, verses 1 and 2. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazarite to separate themselves to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink.

[14:11] He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes fresh or dried. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds of the skins.

And this idea of separation is emphasised in the next paragraph as well and the one after that. This vow allowed either men or women to commit voluntarily to serve the Lord in a special way for a particular period of time.

Perhaps at home you have something that is set apart for a particular purpose. It might be in your wardrobe and there's that shirt which you only wear for parties or there's that dress that you only wear for particular special occasions and it's set apart.

In other words, you wouldn't dream of wearing it like for church on Sunday or at school or at work because it's distinct. It's set apart.

And in the same way, the Nazarite vow was a way in which anyone could set themselves apart to serve the Lord for a particular period of time. Of course, it therefore meant that the Nazarites was a perfect picture of what God's people as a whole were meant to be.

[15:38] They were meant to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation set apart to serve the Lord. That is precisely the purpose for which he has rescued them and brought them to himself to be his people.

They were to be separate and distinct from the nations around them. And therefore, every time you saw a Nazarite, they were a reminder precisely of that.

Now, although Numbers 5 and 6 may seem a million miles away from where we are today, actually, they are echoed in the New Testament where we see so clearly that those who belong to Jesus are set apart to serve him.

So keep a finger in Numbers and turn, if you will, to 2 Corinthians chapter 6, the end of 2 Corinthians chapter 6 on page 1164, certainly in my version of the Church Bible.

Page 1164, 2 Corinthians chapter 6. I'm going to read from verse 16.

[16:46] And these are words that the Apostle Paul is quoting, words which were originally spoken to that first Numbers generation. Let me read chapter 6, chapter 6, verse 16 to chapter 7, verse 1.

For we are the temple of the living God. As God said, I'll make my dwelling among them and walk among them and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

And then we have the call to be distinctive. Therefore, go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing, then I will welcome you and I'll be a father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.

And now comes the application. Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

If we belong to Jesus, we have the amazing privilege of God dwelling with us by his Spirit, walking in our midst. And therefore, we are to live distinctive lives set apart for the very purpose of serving him.

[18:09] At work and at school, working first and foremost to serve the Lord rather than to serve ourselves or to serve anyone else. With friends and family, living distinctively rather than just fitting in with everyone else.

not marrying or going out with someone who doesn't serve the Lord. What do you say? Why do we need to hear this?

Well, for the simple reason that in the book of Numbers, God's people quickly forget their distinctiveness. They end up worshipping the gods of the nations around them. And therefore, I wonder where this week, perhaps as you kind of look ahead to the week ahead and just conscious of things coming up, I wonder where actually you will need to remember exactly this principle, that if you belong to Jesus, you are set apart to serve him.

Perhaps at a particular event you're going to, or perhaps with a particular group of friends, perhaps at school, perhaps in a particular meeting, at work, perhaps it's a decision you're going to have to make this week and you're going to have to say to yourself, I belong to Jesus and therefore this is the decision I'm going to make.

Or perhaps it's in your ambitions and your priorities. This is what I'm ambitious for. Or perhaps it's, it could be a whole load of things, couldn't it?

[19:41] In other words, is serving Jesus a kind of an afterthought in our lives or is serving him because we are set apart to serve him the thing which actually shapes everything else?

It's worth saying as well that for those of us who are parents, does this principle shape our parenting? After all, children are no different from adults, are they? In the sense that really they want to fit in just as we generally, as adults, want to fit in.

Therefore we need to be teaching our children that actually if they belong to the Lord Jesus, they've been set apart. Not to fit in with everyone else, but to serve him.

And of course, that is a wonderful privilege to serve him rather than living to serve ourselves. So firstly, a set apart people. Secondly, chapters 7 and 8, a forgiven people.

Because I wonder, just as we were talking, about a set apart people, I wonder if you kind of spotted the tension that is the very heart of the Nazarite vow.

[20:54] In other words, the very existence of the Nazarites. It was a reminder to serve God's people of their sin, of their inability to meet God's standards of holiness.

After all, why else would you set yourself apart to serve God in a particular way for a particular period of time if it wasn't because actually you were all too conscious of the fact that you were not who you should be?

I guess it's the same, isn't it, if you're someone who's embarked on a January diet or a post-Christmas, you know, I need to get fit drive. In fact, this flyer came through our letterbox bang on cue this week, invited me to join a gym and I thought to myself, it must be January.

It's the only time of the year we get them. But of course, the very fact that you might go on a diet in January or the very fact that you join a gym in January, it's an admission, isn't it, that you're not the kind of person you wish to be.

And that is why it's so wonderful to read chapters 7 and 8. If you haven't read them in full, I'd love to encourage you to read them in full. They are about God's provision for the forgiveness of sin.

[22 : 05] At the opening ceremony of the tabernacle and its sacrificial system. And so in chapter 7, each of the 12 tribes of Israel, they bring offerings that will be used in the sacrifices at the opening ceremony.

The summary comes in verse 11. The Lord said to Moses, they shall offer their offerings, one sheath each day for the dedication of the altar. And it's, I think it's the third longest chapter in the Bible for those who are interested in those kinds of things.

And it goes all the way up to verse 89 as each of the 12 tribes they bring identical offerings. And then in chapter 8, there's the consecration of the Levites as they are set apart to serve God in the tabernacle.

Again, let's work through it a bit. In verse 7, they go through a ceremony of ritual cleansing. Thus you shall do to them to cleanse them, sprinkle the water of purification upon them, and let them go with a razor over their body and wash their clothes and cleanse themselves.

In verse 8, a sin offering is then made for their sin. Then let them take a bull from the herd and its grain offering a fine flour mixed with oil and you shall take another bull from a herd for a sin offering.

[23 : 25] In verse 10, you'll see the people then lay their hands on the Levites signifying substitution because, notice verse 11, they will serve at the tabernacle instead of the firstborn.

Now, we thought a bit about that last week and the summary comes in verses 17 and 18. Verse 17, For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast.

On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated them for myself.

And I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel.

Because, you see, what is the job of the Levites? Well, it's there in verse 19. It's to serve Aaron, the priest, in the tabernacle, in the offering of animal sacrifices.

It's to make atonement for the sins of the people so that God's wrath will not break out against them. They'll be a forgiven people, in other words, with God dwelling in their midst.

[24 : 40] The most wonderful of privileges. And if you flip back just to the end of chapter 7, chapter 7, verse 89, you have a really beautiful summary of that.

God dwelling amidst his people. Chapter 7, verse 89. And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony from between the two cherubim and it spoke to him.

The tabernacle, in other words, is a powerful symbol of relationship. The place of mercy and forgiveness and also the place from which the Lord God speaks to his people through Moses.

And yet, of course, the glorious reality is that if we're followers of Jesus Christ, we are even more blessed. because through him and his death on the cross, in fact, only through him and his death on the cross, do we find a resolution between this kind of tension between the holiness of God on the one hand and our sin.

In other words, how is it that a holy God can dwell amidst sinful people? Well, Jesus himself was richly clean. He had no sin. His death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin as a substitute.

[26 : 09] The result, atonement, the forgiveness of sins and a relationship with God, God dwelling with us by his spirit for all those who trust in him.

A set-apart people, a forgiven people and now a blessed people. Chapter 6, verses 22 and 27.

As I said earlier, probably the best known words in the book of Numbers. Let me read them for us.

Chapter 6, verse 22. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his son, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel.

You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel and I will bless them. Now you'll see this blessing is made up of three phrases and each phrase is longer than the previous one, making the point, as one commentator puts it, that God's blessing, it begins as a stream and ends with a torrent, a wonderful picture, a torrent of blessing.

[27 : 30] I guess it's fair to say is that we don't really attach much significance to the word blessing. You know, we may say bless you when someone sneezes or something like that. And yet, of course, in the Bible it's full of significance because it's the opposite of curse.

The curse that was experienced by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden under the just judgment of God, having turned away from God, they're under his judgment, driven away from his presence.

And then the promise of blessing 12 chapters later in Genesis chapter 12, the promise that God will undo the curse, the blessing instead of belonging to God as his forgiven people of being part of a great nation.

And now they are here in Numbers. They are indeed a great nation. They belong to God as his forgiven people, as his redeemed people.

So notice in chapter 4, sorry, in verse 24, God promises his protection of them. Here they are, they're about to send out on this dangerous journey to the promised land.

[28 : 37] A journey through the wilderness. They're going to have to fight against powerful nations. So God promises his protection. And then in verses 25 and 26, there's a promise of God's presence.

The Lord lifting up his countenance or his face. I wonder, when was the last time did you see someone's face shining? Perhaps at a children's party as a kind of delicious chocolate cake is brought in with sort of loads of candles on top.

Or perhaps not many candles, in fact, probably only about six or seven or something like that. But nonetheless, this wonderful chocolate cake. And their faces light up in anticipation. Or perhaps it was when a son or a daughter comes back home having been away and their parents' faces light up.

Or perhaps two lovers gazing into each other's eyes. Their faces alight with joy. When was the last time you thought of God like this?

Taking pleasure in. Taking delight in his people. I guess there'll be some of us here and actually we really struggle to take it in.

[29 : 54] Wonderfully, the word you in the blessing is not plural. It's not a kind of general bless you generally. It's in the singular.

In other words, you and you and you and you. Singular. Blessing. Gloriously. And the blessing of course is not a prayer.

It's not praying and asking that God might do something. Rather, it's a declaration of what God is committed to doing. Blessing his people.

I wonder what you consider to be your greatest privilege. Perhaps for some you've had the privilege of meeting someone famous. Perhaps for others it might be your upbringing. Perhaps for others you've attended a special event or you've had the opportunity to go on a wonderful trip somewhere. And yet whatever other blessings we may regard ourselves of having had, how much greater is this? It's all summed up in verse 26 in the word peace.

[31 : 05] Being at peace with God and receiving all the benefits that flow from that. just as on the first Easter Sunday the risen Jesus came and stood amongst his disciples and declared peace be with you.

The peace that comes when we trust in the Lord Jesus and his death on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. The one who will indeed protect us on our journey as we travel through the wilderness of life in this world to the new creation.

the one whose face shines upon us. Well again we need to ask the question don't we why do we need to hear this?

Well for the simple reason that like God's people in the book of Numbers as they journey to the promised land you and I face two great temptations.

The first of those is simply to forget how much the Lord God has blessed us. The second of those two temptations as we forget is then to look for blessing elsewhere.

[32 : 17] It's why in just a few weeks time we'll see they grumble. They grumble about food. They grumble about their leaders. They grumble about what they're being asked to do and they want to go back.

They want to go back to Egypt. it's precisely the danger that we face. For those who are not yet followers of Jesus we can completely fail to spot the fact and I think it's just worth asking yourself if you have fallen into this category we can completely fail to spot the fact that actually to be a Christian to follow Jesus is to be the most blessed of people and if you miss that then inevitably you'll be looking elsewhere for blessing and you'll wonder why wherever you look elsewhere it fails to deliver and it's the same for those of us who do belong to Jesus.

We lose sight of just how much God has blessed us. We take his blessings for granted. We grumble when life doesn't go the way we'd like it to go. We find ourselves doubting his goodness

and we find ourselves hardening our hearts just as this numbers generation hardened their hearts. And as we do that how easily we look for blessings elsewhere in our possessions perhaps in our wealth in relationships in success at work in producing successful children or a busy social life or we're always living for the next holiday and looking for a blessing in that.

You see what is God saying to us today by his Holy Spirit? He is saying stop.

[34 : 05] Stop. Remember your identity. You are part of God's set apart forgiven people.

The most blessed of people. There is no greater blessing than to be at peace with God and to know his pleasure.

Why on earth would you want to look for blessing elsewhere? Thank you.