

NUMBERS

Lesson 8 - Chapter 6

Numbers chapter 6 consists of two major pieces: the first 21 verses establish the office of the Nazarite then the last 5 verses give us what has come to be called the Aaronic Blessing. Both subjects are worthy of being given sufficient time and so that's what we're going to do.

This is the only place in the Torah where the Nazarite is referred to; but we will encounter the Nazarite in a number of places in the Old Testament outside of the Torah and we'll also see that it is still in operation in the New Testament era as Paul himself participates in Nazarite ritual at the suggestion of James (brother of Jesus) the leader of the Messianic Jews, as proof to other Jews that Paul approves of, honors, and obeys the Torah even though he believes Yeshua is the Messiah.

Nazarites figure into several important Bible stories: Sampson (of the tribe of Dan), Samuel (alternately described as an Ephramite and a Levite), and some say John the Baptist (which I have some doubts about because he was a Levite, but it could well have been so). Some claim Jesus was a Nazarite, but I see no evidence to support that notion, and every reason to say He was not. The main reason Jesus is sometimes called a Nazarite is faulty Christian tradition born out of an error that is still prevalent: and the error is that a Nazarite and a Nazarene are the same thing. Jesus IS called a Nazarene, because that's what people who lived in Nazareth, his hometown, was called. But, Nazareth had nothing directly to do with Nazarites.

Let's read the entire chapter together.

READ NUMBERS CHAPTER 6 all

In the first couple of verses we discover the first important attribute of a Nazarite: one becomes a Nazarite by taking a vow. The second important attribute is that both men AND women could become Nazarites. But I'll tell you now that as often happens in the Bible things change over the years. The office of the Nazarite, who could be one, how long of term a person could remain a Nazarite, what their obligations and duties were, and so on, evolved over the centuries.

Let me use that comment as a reminder that while what we read in the Bible is the truth, that doesn't mean that everything that happens in it is God-approved. For instance we read of the Israelites building a Golden Calf, and then worshipping it. The story is true: but did God approve of this? Of course not. It wasn't a Godly thing being dealt with in the Golden Calf fiasco. Now, that particular apostasy was spoken of in the Scripture as wrong, and terrible

consequences were meted out to those who participated in the making and worshipping of the Bull idol, so it's not tough for any reader to know that evil was occurring. At other times in the Word however we'll read about some event, but little or no mention is given as to whether this was necessarily a good thing or bad that went on. We're left to discern whether it was good or bad according to our understanding of the Torah.....an understanding that we're supposed to **already** possess. In other words, it is assumed from our knowing God and His commandments, and from our reading the context of the story, whether the point of the story is to commend a good act, or to decry a bad one.

So what a Nazarite was and what a Nazarite did was not the same a few hundred years after it's establishment as it was when given to Moses; and what we read here in Numbers doesn't really match the way a Nazarite operated in Sampson's day, nor later in Samuel's day, nor later still in St. Paul's day. That is NOT because God changed things.....it's because MEN changed things.

In Numbers 5 where we dealt with the water-ordeal of the suspected adulterous wife...a God-ordained command..... I told you that shortly after the death of Christ a very influential Rabbi declared that the practice of this Law of God was to be abolished. Now was this rabbinical decision a reflection that Yehoveh was changing something, abolishing one of His own Laws, and using a man to do it? No, this was a man changing something that he thought ought to be changed do to certain circumstances of the times that greatly troubled him. Did the Rabbi do this with evil intent? No; in fact from an earthly perspective.....and maybe even in a sense from a heavenly perspective.....he did the right thing. For the whole matter of dealing with adultery had become twisted and perverse. Men skated and women were persecuted for no other reason than men just got tired of their current wives; and by declaring that they suspected that their wives were unfaithful, they could get a quickie divorce and be congratulated for their piety by the Jewish religious authority to boot. In other words the laws of adultery had become a legitimized fraud.

A similar line of evolution of practice and custom occurred with the office of the Nazarite.

I tell you this because some of you have heard me speak in other lectures that there were two basic kinds of Nazarites: perpetual, and for life. Perpetual, despite the name, referred to a Nazarite who took a vow for a specified period of time, and then was a Nazarite no more after the time limit was up. A Nazarite For Life meant just that: he was born as a Nazarite and would die as a Nazarite.....meaning that it was his MOTHER that made him a Nazarite while still in the womb. The thing is there is no such commandment of God in the Scriptures that establishes the office of Nazarite For Life. We'll read about it but that just means that the practice existed, not that it was a God-ordained practice.

What gets established here in Numbers 6 is the law of the perpetual Nazarite, which means that this person is a Nazarite only for a time and usually for a specific purpose. I'll not be using the term perpetual any further because it is confusing; for to me.....and I suspect to you....perpetual means, "never ending". Why some scholars coined the term "perpetual Nazarite" to indicate a temporary Nazarite is beyond me. The Nazarite referred to in Numbers 6 is temporary. There appears to be no Biblical contemplation at all for a Nazarite For Life.

One good question might be, why would someone want to become a Nazarite in the first place? The answer is generally that someone would swear an oath to God that if God would grant some kind of special favor to them such as to cure them of a disease, or restore their wealth, or (if a woman) give that woman a son, or save them from an enemy.....etc..... then in return they would turn their lives over to God for service to Him, for a time. Now, it didn't take long before a person offering to become a Nazarite became as casual as making it part of a bet. For instance: " If that guy over there isn't at least 7 feet tall, I'll be a Nazarite". We learn from Jewish records that sometimes priests would preside over the sacrificial offerings of hundreds of Nazarites at a time; so many people were doing it. We see Paul, in the N.T. book of Acts, joining with 4 men who must have in some way violated their Nazarite vows, and so had to be purified.

READ ACTS 21:20-28

This is obviously about 4 Nazarites, and equally as obvious to the person who knows Torah (which the New Testament assumes its readers do) that this specifically concerns 4 men who have been **defiled** during the period of their Nazarite vow. We know this because what we see them doing is entering a 7 day period of purification that involves purchasing the proper sacrifices AND having one's head shaved. While shaving one's head was also the procedure at the END of the vow period, a 7-day period of purification was NOT required so far as we know. We're told that Paul also had HIS head shaved and went through the purification procedures right along with these men. This can only mean ONE THING: that Paul had undertaken the vow of a Nazarite. It was not contemplated, let alone permitted, that someone should join others in purification rituals just to show sympathy or as some act of unity. This was deadly serious business. What I'm saying is that this wasn't some act or show that Paul was putting on.

And part of the reason James the Just had Paul do this was because Paul was going to be walking around Jerusalem bald-headed; a sure sign that he had undergone a Nazarite ritual. Everyone knew what that baldhead meant and so he'd be a walking billboard to the effect that Paul followed the Laws of Moses.

We even see another time in which Paul, unmistakably, is at the **end** of a Nazarite vow he has personally under taken: ***NAS Acts 18:18 And Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his haircut, for he was keeping a vow.***

We can also know that a good many details have been left out in the account of Paul and having his hair cut. Because a Nazarite vow was supposed to end AT the Temple, and the hair itself was to be offered as a sacrifice and burned. He had his hair cut in Cenchrea, not Jerusalem. Now, possibly he had his hair trimmed a bit, and then later went to Jerusalem and had his head shaved. Or, perhaps in this era rabbinic law allowed those Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, and had taken a Nazarite vow, to cut their hair, or shave their heads at some other location.....perhaps even saving the hair and later bringing it to the Temple. It's hard to know for sure.

Probably a good analogy as to what a Nazarite amounted to is that they were the monks and nuns, so to speak, of the Hebrew religion. Unlike the Levite Priests who were **born** into lifelong service to God, a Nazarite was just any ordinary Israelite who made a personal choice; he or she volunteered to dedicate themselves wholly to God and unto His service for a specified time period.

But Biblically speaking, a person set-apart for service to God WAS a priest. So did becoming a Nazarite mean that person had become a priest? Generally no. A priest had to come from a very specific bloodline that descended from Aaron. By all appearances, it seems intended that the God-ordained establishment of the office of the Nazarite actually EXCLUDED Levites from taking the Nazarite vow. This is implied by the opening statement in verse 1, which is "...Tell the people of Israel.....". Levites were no longer counted as among "the people of Israel". They had been set aside, they had just gone through an entirely separate census, and later we'll find they don't even get their own territory in the Promised Land. As of now if the Levites were to be apart of this Nazarite office, God should have said... " tell the people of Israel, and tell the sons of Aaron..." or something like that.

Now we will find implications later on in the Bible....outside of the Torah..... that some Levites DID take on the vow of a Nazarite. Why they would do that is mysterious. This was probably another of those non-God ordained changes we discussed that occurred sort of spontaneously in Hebrew society; or it was that some tribes observed the Law and others didn't, or it was that non-priest Levites (ordinary Levites that weren't allowed to be priests) were allowed to make Nazarite vows to be more priest-like.

Verses 3 through 6 gives us the main attributes of a Nazarite whether they be male or female: 1) they are not only to abstain from strong drink, they also cannot drink wine; in fact they can't even eat grapes or partake in any kind of grape product. Grapes, in any form, are off limits. We'll talk more about that. 2) They are not to cut their hair during the time of their vow. And 3), they are prohibited from touching a dead body. What we find in essence is that the Nazarite, by means of his vow and his following these 3 basic and straightforward requirements, is given a status EQUAL to the priests, though a Nazarite is NOT a priest. Of course over time as Tradition started to play a more and more prominent role in Judaism, rules started piling up on rules about the requirements for a Nazarite. And as one expects of manmade rules and doctrines the rules changed over time. So in various parts of the Bible we'll see some Nazarite prohibitions lifted, and others added; but these were NOT a God thing, they were a man thing.

Now 2 of these 3 attributes listed in Numbers 6:3-8 are very similar to what is required of a priest. But if we look more closely the Nazarite requirement is actually somewhat more stringent than for the priest. A priest most certainly CAN drink wine and in fact does during some of the rituals, although he is prohibited from drinking wine as a beverage during the period just before he comes on duty or as he approaches the sanctuary. A Nazarite cannot drink wine at all, nor even sample the source of wine, grapes. Priests could not touch dead bodies, but they could tend to their deceased parents, grandparents, spouses and children. Nazarites were not to touch a corpse under any circumstance and this included close family. So in some ways, the requirements upon the Nazarite even approached that of the High Priest.

Yet in one way the Nazarite had to do things in an opposite fashion to the priests: priests were not allowed to have long hair while Nazarites were not allowed to ever trim their hair. So the office of Nazarite was quite unique among the Israelites.

Why the prohibition against eating grapes? As usual, we're not directly told. But some Jewish scholars think they know why, and I must admit, it sounds pretty credible and fits the God patterns that we've discussed in the past: Israel is often symbolized by the grapevine. The idea is that in every Sabbath year (every 7th year), the land of Israel is consecrated to the Lord. Fields are not to be harvested. Land is not to be tilled or weeded. And, as concerns our study, vineyards are not to be tended. Not only must grapes be left on the vines to rot, even the much necessary twice-yearly pruning of the grapevines was suspended during the Sabbatical year.....the year that the land was set-apart and set-aside for God. So just as the Nazarite is set-apart and set-aside for God for a certain time, during that time the Nazarite symbolizes the quintessential purpose of Israel: holy and set apart for Yehoveh. And the purpose of the Sabbath year is to symbolize that holiness and set-apartedness of Israel. Therefore just as the grapevines are not to be touched and no grapes harvested during the Sabbatical year, so Nazarites are not to touch or eat grapes during the term of their vow (however long or short a period of time that is), which in essence is kind of like a specialized Sabbatical Year for the Nazarite.

In fact the word nazir (from which we get the word Nazarite) came to be used as the term to be used for pruning grapevines. So you see the close connection between the requirement for the Nazarites and the treatment of grapes and grapevines.

There are some mistaken impressions about Nazarites, so let's clear them up. Nazarites were not some kind of weird hermits that went off to eat locusts and honey, and live in the desert, like John the Baptist did. IF the Baptist WAS a Nazarite, the Locusts and Honey he ate, and the generally solitary life he led, were no part of it. Nazarites had no special food prohibitions apart from not eating grapes or grape products and they still had to eat Kosher, as did all Hebrews. Further they could marry, so celibacy was not a part of it. They wore normal clothing. They generally held normal jobs and worked at everyday crafts. The thing that marked them as different, more than anything else, was the wild hair that came with time. Otherwise they remained fully part of normal Israeli society.

I have some serious doubts that John the Baptist was a Nazarite, and the Bible never calls him a Nazarite. The assumption that he was a Nazarite comes from his mother, Elisheva, vowing that she would not drink wine while John was in her womb, and that she would insist that **Yochanon** (John's real Hebrew name) would never drink wine or strong drink (**yayin** or **shekar**). The other assumption is because he was said to have long hair. Well, Nazarites weren't the only Jews in that era to have wild or long hair, or to abstain from wine or strong drink. One well-known group who did the same thing was the Rechabites. We find mention of them in the book of Jeremiah, as Jeremiah takes some Rechabites to the Temple and offers them wine to drink but they decline on account of their family tradition that they supposedly descended for Yitro, Moses' father-in-law. And part of their tradition included not growing grapes or even planting seeds of any kind and that they must live in tents. So while they abstained from grapes it was simply family tradition stemming from an apparently unknown

reason. Essentially they determined to live like the Bedouin and other extra-biblical records indicate that they allowed their hair to grow long.

By John the Baptist's day many traditions had erupted. Many groups and individuals were railing at the corrupt priesthood and the spiritless hollow faith that many were now practicing and it led to all kinds of strange cults and reactions. Asceticism was on the rise, meaning that many Jews were forsaking the comforts of life and community and attempting to get closer to God by means of self-denial. The Essenes of Dead Sea Scroll fame were but one of these many groups and there is much evidence that John the Baptist at the very least had much contact with them, and quite possibly was himself a formal member of the Essene community.

John, by all accounts, was an ascetic. He lived out in the wilderness, and was apparently quite a strange individual. He ate very restricted diet and wore sackcloth and never cut his hair. We would have found hundreds of individuals (and likely thousands) who were much like John in their appearance, for such was the persona of many of those who chose the ascetic lifestyle.

Another reason to doubt that Yochanon the Immerser was a Nazarite is that he was already a Levite by ancestry. And by the Law of Moses the office of Nazarite was not open to Levites. This was not a disadvantage, though. Rather it was simply avoiding needless duplication. Levites were already set-apart for lifetime service to God, whether they were priests or just regular blue-collar Temple workers. John would have been a set-apart Levite no matter under what circumstances he was born. The vow of John not drinking wine may have been more prophetic of Yeshua announcing that He would not drink wine after His fateful Passover until He drank new wine with His disciples, more than an indication of perhaps being a Nazarite.

Now it may well be that PARTS of a kind of modified Nazarite vow were employed in different eras according to different practices and not always necessarily for the purpose as set out in Numbers 6. When one looks in the Talmud and the Mishna we find all sorts of differing rulings, coming from different Rabbis living in different times, about being a Nazarite. Even Samson (in the book of Judges) who is described forthrightly as a Nazarite for life didn't seem to pay much attention to the Nazarite restrictions of Numbers 6 OTHER than as concerned his hair. And he certainly did everything possible NOT to serve God until the last few moments of his life.

So we must be careful in assigning various biblical characters that would come centuries after the law of Numbers 6 with the title of Nazarite in the sense spoken of here in Torah. Abstaining from wine or strong drink was NOT the sure sign of a Nazarite, nor was wearing long hair.

The Hebrew word that we translate as Nazarite is *nazir*. Since Hebrew is what is called a root-word language.....that is, it takes a word and then by changing the vowel sounds, and sometimes adding or subtracting a consonant, it broadens or narrows the meaning of that word, we'll see several Hebrew word offshoots from nazir, and they are quite interesting in their use in the Bible.

The base root-word, nazir, most literally means "set-apart" or "pruned". So literally translated the person who takes the vow is NOT called a Nazarite, they're called a "set-apart person" or a "pruned away person). Whereas nazir...n-a-z-i-r is a positive term that indicates being specially

consecrated for service to God, the Nazarites must also **nazar**.....n-a-z-a-r, be separated, from grapes.....separated in the negative sense of being prohibited from grapes.

Further there is the Hebrew word **nezer** n-e-z-e-r, which literally means shoot or branch. It is the term used for the unpruned grapevine. But the term is also used to denote the High Priest's glorious headpiece (the one with the golden band around it), as well as the long hair of the Nazarite. So when reading these passages in Hebrew we see the obvious parallel between the High Priest's head covering (his special hat), and the Nazarite's head covering (his or her long hair). Nezer, Nazir, and Nazar.....you see how these Hebrew words all work together to help us understand the relationships between priests, grapevines, and Nazarites; and of the Nazarites' being consecrated....set-apart....for God.

Verses 9-12 talk at length about the Nazarite, male or female, being made ritually unclean by coming near a corpse. Actually contacting the body of a dead person was not necessary to defile a Nazarite; simply being in the same room with a dead person was sufficient to contaminate and therefore terminate the period of the Nazarite's vow meaning that after a 7 day period of purification (like what those 4 men and Paul went through in Acts 21), the time frame of the Nazarite's vow started all over again. So you can imagine how fastidiously a Nazarite avoided the dead. But, over the years, the Rabbis came up with several new defilements that a person could contract, causing them to have to repeat the period of their vow. To give you an example of this, sometime just after Christ died there was a person named Queen Helena, who was the wife of a King who ruled over a city-state up in Mesopotamia; she was a gentile who had converted to Judaism. Her son (the prince of her Kingdom) was about to go off to war so she made a vow that if her son returned safely, she would become a Nazarite for 7 years (an unusually long period of time in that era). He came back safe and sound so she followed through and took the vow of a Nazarite.

After the 7 year period was completed she went to Jerusalem for the typical rituals to mark the successful ending of the vow and some Rabbis instructed her that she had not properly observed the Nazarite requirements and told her she had to start all over again (which she did). But near the end of the 2nd seven-year period she became impure (there is no record of the cause of the impurity) and so she had to do yet another 7 years. So all told she was a Nazarite for 21 years, but 14 of those years was due to her fouling up.....at least that was according to the Rabbis.

There is a phrase at the end of verse 12 that is quite interesting: almost all Bibles will say as does our CJB, "...the previous days will not be counted, because his consecration became defiled". This is NOT correct. What the Hebrew says is that the previous days of the Nazarite vow will not be counted because his NEZER became defiled. His nezer, recall, is referring to the hair of the Nazarite because the sign of the consecration of a Nazarite is his HAIR, just as the sign of the High Priest's consecration is his unique headdress, his special hat.

Among the Hebrews and other Middle Eastern cultures the Liver and Kidneys are thought of in the same way as we, today, think of the Heart and Brain. In other words, love was not of the Heart it was of the Kidneys. Thought processes took place not in the Brain but the Heart. The Liver had a lot to do with where the deepest passions were spawned, such as anger and

jealousy.

The hair was another part of human anatomy that was seen as very important to the ancient Middle Eastern cultures. Hair was considered to be the seat of man's vitality and **life force**. Hair, in the pagan world, was often given as a burnt sacrifice to the gods and goddesses. Therefore as the hair was thought to be the seat of life, then it was the HAIR that carried the defilement that a Nazarite might incur. In the same way the hair carried the PURITY of a person's life force; when the Nazarite properly completed his vow period his or her HAIR was shaved off of the head, and burned as an offering, because it was a pure and clean and holy thing to offer to God. The hair of a defiled Nazarite was **not** offered to God; depending on the era it was either burned up in a common fire or it was buried in the ground. We get the full ritual of the Nazarite who has completed his vows from verse 13 - 20. In a nutshell he brings the 4 main kinds of sacrifices: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace and the reparation offerings. It costs the Nazarite 3 lambs, in total, to end his vow. A reminder of just how costly it is when you make a decision to set yourself apart for the Lord.

And after shaving his hair off, the ritual is ended with the words "after that the Nazarite may drink wine, again". The point is he is now released from his vow.

The 6th chapter of Numbers ends with the awesome Aaronic Blessing. Let's re-read it together.

RE-READ NUMBERS 6:22-27

That this blessing immediately follows the law concerning the Nazarite has always been a puzzle to scholars. What is clear, though, is that while the laws of the Nazarite are speaking to but a few, the Aaronic Blessing is upon Israel, collectively.

This blessing was spoken each day immediately following the morning sacrificial offering. Actually this blessing is a very early Hebrew poem. One of the primary duties of the priests was to bless Israel; yet this blessing lets all involved.....the people and the priests....know that the priests are but conduits from the divine; they have no power to bless or curse. They can but speak and remind the people of what God promises and God does.

Every place in our Bibles that this Benediction says Lord or Adonai the original Hebrew says Yehoveh. Yehoveh bless you, Yehoveh shine His face upon you, Yehoveh give you Shalom.

Blessing in our language and in Christianity is a very broad and inclusive term; but that's really only because of our ignorance. Biblically speaking blessing is VERY specific in its meaning: blessing is God bestowing upon His people the things He counts as important and good for us. And when we look through Scripture we find that blessing generally consisted of good health, land, safety, sufficient food, and children.

Blessing is a verb. It involves action. God FEELING kindly toward us isn't blessing us. We certainly WANT Him to have favor towards us but that is NOT what blessing means. In the same way, love is also a verb. Love may be the most misunderstood and misappropriated word in the entire Bible. For in the Hebrew love was not an emotion, it was an action. It's only

in the Western Church of gentiles that love has become a romantic, warm, internal mushy feeling. Certainly love has an emotional component; but just as James tells us that faith without action is no faith at all, so is a love that has no tangible action not love at all. Would you want God to FEEL all fuzzy and warm for you, but not to GIVE to you, tangibly, what you need? Well we're all in luck: for the act of blessing IS the act of giving. And what is it that He gives us? It says here in the Aaronic Blessing that He blesses us with (meaning He actively gives to us) protection, grace, and peace. In the Hebrew it is protection, grace and shalom.

Shalom does not mean only peace; it means well being in every sense. It means that God is near to you, it means His salvation has been made available to you; and it means His sufficiency for you in material things, and a lack of war.

I love this blessing. It sums up God's intention, attitude, and character. But notice who this blessing is specifically aimed at: Israel. This is not a blessing for the whole world. It is only for those that make up the set-apart group that He calls "My People"Israel.....and those joined to Israel. That has never changed.

It's only that instead of joining Israel by means of pledges and oaths and circumcision, one now joins Israel by means of faith in Yeshua HaMashiach. And that is the provision, since about 30 A.D., if a man wants to partake in God's active blessing.

Next week, Numbers Chapter 7.