

Moses in the Desert

When you think of the Books of Leviticus and Numbers, I am not sure whether or not the first concepts that would come to your mind would be forgiveness and holiness, but those are two of the dominant themes of these books. Leviticus 19:1 says, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.””’”

If I turn now to 1 Peter—and Peter knew the Pentateuch well, of course—I’ll read 1 Peter 1, beginning with verse 13:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” Since you call on a Father who judges each man’s work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

He goes on in verse 19 to tell them to remember that they have been redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”

Let us pray.

*Lord, our God, as we turn to Your Word again this morning and seek to understand how to teach Your truth from it, we pray for Your guidance and direction. How much we do need that. And we want to be faithful interpreters, teachers, and appliers of Your Word. Oh, Holy Spirit, bless us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*

We are talking today about Moses in the desert. We begin while the people of Israel are still at Mt. Sinai. That is where the book of Leviticus was revealed. The book of Leviticus repeats quite a bit of what you will find in Exodus 20 through 23. It takes for granted that you know the instructions that Moses received and carried out according to Exodus 25 through 40, when he went up on the mountain and received instructions concerning the tabernacle and the priests. The Book of Leviticus certainly assumes that revelation that God gave to Moses and that Moses had carried out.

I want to discuss four main themes. First, there is the theme of holiness on the part of God and therefore, sanctity on the part of the people. In Leviticus 8, there is a repetition of the ordination of the priests. The priests had to represent God’s holiness, God’s purity, and God’s abhorrence of sin and any type of defilement. It is because of this that we have the episode in Leviticus 10, after Nadab and Abihu had been unfaithful as priests. In verse 3, we read that the Lord told Moses to say to Aaron, “Among those who approach me I will show myself holy. In the sight of all the people I will be honored.” How important it was for the priests to realize that! Nadab and Abihu thought they could compromise in some way. We are not exactly sure about the nature of the ‘strange fire’ that they offered, but it was against God’s will, and Nadab and Abihu immediately received the curse of the covenant—death. God is a holy God. He is totally separate, but He nevertheless comes into the fellowship of His people. When He comes into the fellowship of His people, He demands sanctity—a removal, as far as it is possible, of all sin and impurity. God calls for repentance, confession, forgiveness, removal of guilt, and then to walk in that way.

God wants righteous people. He wants people who are in a right relation with Him, who reflect His righteousness, who walk the orthodox way, the straight road. That is what God wanted before the people ever started marching through the desert. He wanted a pure, orthodox people. To help these people become the sanctified people He desired, He prescribed these many sacrifices.

Secondly, there is the theme of sacrifice. There were many different types of sacrifices. The priests had quite a task, but each one of those sacrifices referred to something very specific. There was a bloodless offering, but then there were the blood offerings where animals were slaughtered for sacrifice. There was the burnt offering, which was intended to go up in smoke, the fire offering whether it was animal or cereal, and the wave offering, which was meant to be lifted up. Often these dealt with the same objects, but the motion and the ritual that was attached to these sacrifices was all-important because they represented some aspect of the reconciliation between God and man. Through these different sacrifices, men and women indicated their repentance, received forgiveness, and were assured of having their sins covered. I will not go through all these sacrifices and I do not expect you to remember them all, but I mention these to give you an impression of the tremendous variety. God provided very well for sinful people, and the priests had to know each sacrifice. They had to be able to officiate and to lead the people so that they would bring the correct sacrifice at the proper time.

The third theme is the theme of atonement. When you think of sacrifice, you must immediately remember that God abhorred sin and He knew that He had a sinful people. Even though He had redeemed them from Egypt, even though they had been sealed by the blood, sin remained amongst the people. Trespass, transgression, missing the mark—whatever word you want to use, there was sin. There was more than mere failure; there was rebellion. There were sins of commission and sins of omission and often sins of omission were as much rebellion as failure. I want to make very clear that when we read of Abel and Cain bringing sacrifices, we are not sure that we can ascribe all these various nuances to them. We do know that they sacrificed and it may be that they were seeking to express one of the concepts that was later written down in the Mosaic law. It is even possible that the idea of substitution was already in the mind of Cain, because it was his offering that was well-pleasing. We do not find a theology of sacrifice until we get to Leviticus, and we have to be careful about how much we read back into Genesis 4, where we read of Cain and Abel's sacrifice, or Noah's sacrifice in Genesis 8. We do know that when Noah came out of the ark he offered a sacrifice that was well-pleasing. The idea of sacrifice was present from the earliest times, but now God demanded it by decree and by ordinance, by law and careful explication and application. Remember that these were the redeemed Israelites who had to bring their sacrifices because they continued to be a sinful people. They continued to need a substitute, but the Lamb who was slain from before the foundations of the earth had not yet been offered. All these lambs and birds and cows and sheep were offered as symbols pointing forward to the great anti-type, the Christ. That is why the Book of Hebrews says that there is no need now for any bloodshed or any type of sacrifice at all, except for sacrifice in the sense of expressing gratitude.

Finally, the sacrifices had a dimension of commemoration, joy, and worship. I want to point out, for example, that the sacrifice that is so carefully prescribed for all situations in the book of Leviticus (and also somewhat in Numbers and Deuteronomy) was to give the people the assurance of forgiveness. They could be forgiven. In Leviticus 4, after the guilt offerings and trespass offerings are listed, the passage concludes, "and they shall be forgiven." The redeemed people, as they sinned day by day, could still be a cleansed and sanctified people through the substitutionary sacrifice. By this sacrifice, they expressed repentance and asked for forgiveness, then received the assurance that they were right with God. They were cleansed.

A forgiven people are a grateful people, and many of the sacrifices could even have a two-fold significance—seeking forgiveness while at the same time already saying, “Thank You, Lord, for Your atoning work. Thank You for Your forgiveness. Thank You for Your cleansing.” The gratitude that needed to be expressed had a commemorating dimension to it. The people needed to honor God by remembering what He had done. By the way, the chief part of thanking God is to glorify Him and the best way to glorify God is to thank Him. These sacrifices were intended to bring glory and honor to God, not only because the people were obeying Him, but also because they were recognizing Him. Remember that we must bring our sacrifices—not as atoning anymore because that has already been accomplished—but particularly in the idea of giving thanks, remembering what God has done, and consecrating ourselves.

Many of the sacrifices that the Old Testament Israelites brought were not completely burnt up. It was only the *olah kaliel*, the “burnt offering,” that was completely burned. Most of the fat was to be burned, as well, since people living in a hot desert were not supposed to eat fat. Instead, they burned the fat and it became an aroma well-pleasing to the Lord, because it was, in a way, the best of the animal. Most of the sacrifices that were brought, however—all the grains and meals and animals—were food for the priests and their families. Therefore, sacrifices had to be brought in order to keep the priests alive and to keep the Levites strong and functioning. Thus, sacrifices definitely included the idea of “gift” but also the idea of “support.”

One of the great sacrifices was offered on the Day of Atonement, which we read about in Leviticus 16. Some people have said they like the idea of atonement, but I do not like the term very much because it has been misused by so many people, as if we can become at peace with God through our efforts. It is only Christ Jesus, through His sacrifice, who can bring us to a right relationship with God. But the idea of the atonement, especially as revealed in Leviticus 16, must be kept distinct from the Passover. The Passover feast was a commemorative feast, celebrating the great redemption. God brought the people from slavery into freedom, delivered them from physical and spiritual bondage. God did this by the slaying of the firstborn and the slaying of the Passover lamb, whose blood was placed on the doors of those who were covered by the blood. The Passover celebrated particularly the great redemption of the Passover lamb. The Day of Atonement was a different feast. This feast had two goats. The first goat was slaughtered and its blood represented the cleansing blood. The other goat was the scapegoat, the one that had to be led away. Hands were laid on him and he was led into the desert because he had to carry away the sins of the people. By the way, Yom Kippur, the day of covering, is still a great day of celebration for the Jewish people today.

The book of Leviticus also gives us the feasts in chapter 23, particularly. There were three things that the feasts were meant to accomplish. They were times for commemoration—to remember and to give expression to some great deed that God had done in the past. These feasts were to be times of rejoicing. God wanted a happy people, a rejoicing people. There was to be the festive offering, special offerings during the feast to give expression to that deep, heartfelt joy. These people were to rejoice because they knew that they had a God who cared, a God who forgave, a God who led, and a God who provided. God wanted a rejoicing people. We know that from the Psalms, too, which contain many calls to rejoice, although Hosea 9 tells the people not to rejoice because they are not right with God. Anybody who is not right with God cannot rejoice. In a real sense, the Bible calls us to give expression to real joy that can only come from a sense of forgiveness and being fully right with God. Finally, the feasts always had an eschatological dimension. Each feast contained elements of commemoration, joy, and the eschatological dimension in that each feast always pointed forward to the Messiah’s first coming and to the Messiah’s second coming.

In the first ten chapters of the Book of Numbers, there are three very important theological factors. The first is organization and order. (I was on the committee for the NIV translation work on the Book of Numbers, and when Bakers Evangelical Commentary on the whole Bible was being prepared and the various books were assigned, no one cared to write a commentary on Numbers because it is such a dead, stuffy book. Robert Elwell, the editor, couldn't believe it when I volunteered to write on Numbers because I find Numbers to be such a very interesting book.) Anyway, if you study the book of Numbers, you will find first of all that God is a God of organization and a God of order. If Leviticus stresses holiness and cleanliness, the first chapters of Numbers stress organization—"Get yourself organized. You are a political unit now, a holy nation. Show your holiness by the way you are organized.

Sometimes I feel terrible that I have bad thoughts when I walk into a house that is all messed up with stuff lying around everywhere. When I walk into a study and see papers and books stacked everywhere, I think to myself, "How on earth does that man know where he is?" Some people know exactly where everything is in the midst of what seems to me to be total disorder, but God wants order. God wants good arrangement, and He gave every tribe its place. Judah was at the center leading, and the three sons of Aaron each had their place, and each one of the priestly groups had their duties. This order meant that there was no messing around. You walked in your place. You did the duties you were assigned and you did them with joy and gladness. You did them obediently. Whether you were a child or one of the men up in the front, you did your part in your place according to God's order and arrangement. If you ever spend time in the military, you get a good lesson in order, arrangement, obedience and schedule. I think sometimes that every preacher should have had at least a year in the military under an old, shouting sergeant! Perhaps we can do it without that, but God wanted order, good arrangement, everyone in his place, everything done according to God's way.

Another thing that we find in Numbers is an emphasis on purity. Just before the people start out, the text deals with various types of impurity—adultery, leprosy and skin diseases. We see the Nazarite vow, and how the Levites had to be set apart and kept apart. In Numbers, God would repeat in more detail than before what He expected for a specific situation. When you find repetitions in Numbers of what was already stated in Exodus and Leviticus, you have to remember that God is repeating what He had said before, applying it to the specific situation. Numbers is God's will applied to very specific situations while the people are on the move. If you pay close attention to Numbers, you understand that God reveals Himself in the course of history, in the crucible of history. As things happened, God would repeat Himself through Moses. He would explicate. He would never contradict what was said before, but He might expand, or apply what He had said before in a unique and specific way.

In Numbers 9 we find a repetition of the Passover requirements, but this is now in the context of what happens when someone is outside of the camp either because of travel or because of a death in the family or some other uncleanness. The question is whether they can celebrate Passover, so the regulations for the Passover, which you will find in Exodus 12, are repeated here to explain what should happen in those situations. Everyone needs to celebrate the Passover, so God makes provisions for celebrating it a month later when these people have been able to be back in, to be purified, cleansed, etc. God helps His people adapt to circumstances. God is not rigid. God is flexible. God never moves from one point to the other, but I like to think of God having his feet firmly planted in His will and then as human circumstances change, He has a way of bending forward and leaning sideways, but He keeps His feet in place. I think it is well for preachers and teachers, fathers and mothers, to keep themselves firmly rooted, but to kind of bend along with some of the breezes that sometimes blow in the family because of what the young people and neighbors and your own sinful hearts may introduce.

The last part of chapter 9 and the first part of chapter 10 really give expression to the covenantal concept of Emmanuel, “God with us.” In that section we see the cloud above the tabernacle, the pillar of fire and the cloud by day. This represented God with us, God protecting, God ever present. The Israelites never had to wonder where God was. He was there with them, above them, overshadowing them, enlightening them, guiding and preserving them. We also read about the horn in the first ten verses of chapter 10—“Make two trumpets of hammered silver.” We read in the book of Revelation that one day the trumpet will sound and in 1 Corinthians 15:2, we read that the dead will be raised. There is an eschatological dimension here again too. The trumpets were for calling the people, telling them that God was speaking and it was time to feast, or time to keep the Sabbath, or time to sacrifice, or time to move on. The trumpet had to be blown with many different types of blasts according to the occasion, but the trumpet was in a way the voice of Emmanuel. God spoke, God called through the trumpet. When we were traveling in the late 1970s with a group of students from Reformed Theological Seminary, we spent six weeks in Jordan and Palestine and we had a few demonstrations of how these people could blow the ram’s horn. If somebody stood on a hilltop and blew the horn, you could hear it echo and re-echo through the valleys. It is a piercing sound, one of the most beautiful sounds I think there is. But I am waiting for Gabriel to blow that trumpet again, because that is the voice of Jesus.

Let us move on to the revelation in the desert while the people are on the march. Here we have quite a theology of what I would call the wilderness march. The first thing to which I will call your attention is Numbers 10:33: “They set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest.” What a verse. What a message. Concerning the ark, we have to go back to Exodus again to get the dimensions and description of the ark and the symbolism of the ark. The ark represented not only the face of God, but the very heart of God, the presence of God. His name and face were represented with the ark, which was kept in the holy of holies, but when it was time to march, the pillar and the cloud went before the people. The ark was right in front, and when the ark stopped, the people stopped. And when the ark was picked up and moved, the people moved because God led. God was not only present, but He led them. It was the ark of covenant that represented God the sovereign, who had an unbreakable relationship with His people. It represented that not only He was with them, but that He was as He truly is, the God who had revealed Himself so fully in Exodus 34. The ark always led them to the place of rest. They had to have their *chavath*, “rest,” in the desert, too. Sometimes the rest came after three days, sometimes after a few weeks, and once they had to stop and rest for about 38 years, but the ark brought them each time to rest. God brings His people to rest. He brought Himself to rest after creation. He brought the people to rest in places in the desert, but they were always resting places where people could rest and gain strength to move on before the next one and the next one, until finally, as Hebrew 4 tells us, we come to that eternal rest, which is symbolized by the Promised Land. The people had to rest in the desert so that they would have strength to arrive in the temporary resting place, the land of Canaan. God wants His people to rest.

As we move on in chapter 11, we read of fire because of complaining. God does not want a complaining people. He burned them up. That is the first judgment that was sent, the fire of death, as soon as they began to complain, but God sent blessing also. He provided the people with manna and quail. In chapter 11, we learn a great deal about how the Spirit of God becomes an equipping Spirit. We could spend quite a bit of time on the Holy Spirit, and I just want to mention a few things here. In Numbers 11 we read how Eldad and Medad stayed in the camp. After some of the elders had been appointed to become assistants for Moses, 68 came around Moses and received of the Spirit who was upon Moses. They received the Spirit and this was evident by the way they prophesied, but Eldad and Medad stayed in the camp. Joshua was concerned about that, but Moses said to have no fear. Now what did the Spirit do who came upon those 70? He equipped them. He qualified them. He gave them the ability and the authority

to do the work that Moses assigned them. There was too much work for Moses to do alone, so these men received the Spirit. The text does not say that the 70 were converted or regenerated. It says that the Spirit came upon them and they prophesied so that they could stand with Moses as Moses did his prophetic judging work. This was an equipping Spirit.

We also read about the Holy Spirit in other places in the Pentateuch. For example, in the first six verses of Exodus 31, we read of an equipping Spirit who helped a man to do architectural work and craftsmanship. The man who had to build the tabernacle possessed the Spirit. The Spirit equips people to be builders. The Spirit enabled men to speak the Word of God. He equipped them for speaking the Word of God, and we will come across that again in Numbers 24. The Spirit empowered the judges like Othniel, Gideon, and Samson. Elsewhere we read that by the Spirit, people were able to sing. The Spirit is an equipping Spirit. He gives ability and He gives authority. And that is the main emphasis when the Old Testament talks about the Spirit. The entire prophetic order existed and was able to function because the Spirit came upon the prophets and gave them the ability and the right to speak.

Some people have the ability to do something, but not the right to do it. An unmarried woman may have the ability to have a child, but she does not have right to have it. And some married couples have the right to be parents, but they do not seem to have the ability. We must make a distinction between authority and ability. The fact that I have the ability to do something does not mean I have the right to do it. A misunderstanding of this principle is what leads to a lot of the problems with the feminist movement. The point is that the priests were given the ability and the right to be priests when the oil was put upon them. The oil represented the Spirit who equipped them. He equipped the prophets. He equipped Joshua. He equipped Moses. He equipped the elders. The Spirit is an equipping Spirit. He is also a beautifying Spirit. “Thy Spirit, O Lord, makes life to abound; the earth is renewed and fruitful the ground”—Psalm 104, referring to Genesis 1:2. The Spirit is a beautifying Spirit, but there are only a few references in the Old Testament to the Spirit being a regenerating Spirit. Ezekiel 37 is the grand passage of how the Spirit is a regenerating, life-giving Spirit, so the Old Testament does not deny that, but we must never forget that the Spirit who was active in creation, in restraining sin in the days prior to Noah and in the desert too, undoubtedly, is first of all emphasized as the equipping power of God. When we read, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me,” we often think of Christ, but Christ enables us by His Spirit.

So we see the equipping Spirit and how the Spirit had to work in the desert in the face of all that opposition. There are four instances of opposition. First, we see Aaron and Miriam opposing Moses, the prophet, saying, “We can talk too. We can lead.” Miriam, the woman, is the leader and she is struck down with leprosy because God says in Numbers 12:6, “I choose My spokesman and I have spoken to Moses like to no other one and I have chosen Moses. Aaron, take a back seat. Miriam, back off.” Moses was the youngest of the three, but he was the God-appointed, God-equipped one.

Secondly, there is the story of the spies. We read in Numbers 13 and 14 how the ten brought in great opposition against the taking of the land, but Joshua and Caleb are heroes. Then in chapter 15, we see how to deal with the sin of opposition through the classic example of a Sabbath-breaker. A man who deliberately went out on the Sabbath to pick up sticks was put into detention. Then he had to be executed. The full curse of the covenant had to be applied to him because he had willfully, premeditatedly sinned against God.

Numbers 15 tells us there are premeditated sins and accidental sins. There were sacrifices for the accidental sins, even an accidental murder. But David knew, and he speaks of this in Psalm 51, that there

was no sacrifice for him as a murderer and as an adulterer because he had done it thoughtfully. He planned his adultery, he planned his murder, and there was no sacrifice for the sin of rebellion.

Finally there is the sin of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, who refused to accept Moses' leadership. The problem of leadership kept recurring. Aaron and Miriam challenged Moses in chapter 12, and now in chapter 16, it was Aaron's leadership that was defied by Korah, Dathan and Abiram. I hope you are familiar with that story. In chapter 17, there is the budding of the almond branch and Aaron is re-confirmed in his priestly work and his priestly position. After the great challenge by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, we read about the priests and Levites and offerings in chapters 18 and 19. Again, there is repetition. After the four great sins that are listed, there is a repetition again in chapter 18 and 19 concerning the priests and the Levites—their place, their role and how they had to be supported. Again, God spoke and God revealed His will in circumstances as they unfolded in the course of the journeys in the desert. Chapter 20 tells us of the tragedy in Moses' life. Moses got so tired of those complaining, rebellious people that he hit the rock when he should have spoken to it. We know that Moses received punishment, and he accused the people of that in the first four chapters of Deuteronomy, saying, "I could not go in because of you" It almost sounds petulant, but Moses laid the finger right where the blame lay. The people tried and tired him. The devil was busy in the desert. And the people who should have been so grateful to Moses became his undoing. He had mediated for them at Sinai, and again and again he spoke on their behalf, but they also became his undoing.

Numbers gives us a theology of the wilderness. God is sovereign. Read the first 20 chapters of Numbers. He is in charge of the cosmos. He can provide water. He can provide birds. He can provide manna. He can give shade by day and light by night. He knows where the resting places are. He shows Himself king of the cosmos, but at the same time He shows Himself to be a holy God; He would never compromise His purity and His holiness. God is a providing God. One of the great provisions He brought was forgiveness. He would forgive and forgive and forgive, but He would also provide the Spirit to enable the people to do their duty. He was a providing God, but the Lord was also the curse-bringing God. He executed the curse of the covenant. There are many blessings that can be enumerated, but God kept covenant also when He executed the curse. Finally, God really proved Himself to be the God that He revealed Himself to be to Moses. He is a compassionate God. He always suffered with His people. He is gracious and forgiving. God was a God who forgave because His loving-kindness and His faithfulness never, never ended. The story of Israel in the desert is the story of an ungrateful people blessed and kept by a wondrous and gracious God.