



## Numbers - Chapter Six

### I Numbers 1:1-10:10 - Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (continues)

#### I.d. Numbers 5:1-6:27 - Cleansing the camp (continues/concludes)

##### Summary of Chapter Six

This chapter deals with how people can consecrate themselves for special service to God. Such people were called Nazirites and made a special vow before God to keep themselves holy in order to serve God in some particular way. It required them to absolve themselves from doing some of the things that people in general did, such as drinking alcohol, cutting their hair or coming into contact with the dead, even a close relative.

The chapter concludes with the priestly benediction for all of Israel.

#### I.d.iv Numbers 6:1-21 - The Nazirites

Nazirites were the most dedicated laypeople in the OT. Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist were lifelong Nazirites, but usually a person took a vow to become a Nazirite for only a specific period of time.

##### I.d.iv.1 Numbers 6:1-6 - Definition of a Nazirite

A Nazirite had to avoid cutting his or her hair, since both men and women could be Nazirites (v.2), not eat any product made from grapes, and avoid contact with any dead body.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup> Speak to the Israelites and say to them: When either men or women make a special vow, the vow of a nazirite, to separate themselves to the Lord, <sup>3</sup> they shall separate themselves from wine and strong drink; they shall drink no wine

vinegar or other vinegar, and shall not drink any grape juice or eat grapes, fresh or dried. <sup>4</sup> All their days as nazirites they shall eat nothing that is produced by the grape-vine, not even the seeds or the skins.

#### Numbers 6:1-4

The vow of a nazirite. There were several remarkable Nazirites in the Bible: Samson (Judges 13:5), Samuel (1 Samuel 1:11), John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), and to a lesser degree the apostle Paul (Acts 18:18); the vow was certainly open to women, but there is no Biblical example of a woman taking the vow, except perhaps for Manoah's wife during her pregnancy with Samson (Judges 13:4), which may have been more to do with preparing Samson while he was still in the womb.

To separate themselves to the Lord. The vow of the Nazirite was to express one's special desire to draw close to God and to separate one's self from the comforts and pleasures of this world. The English word Nazirite transliterates Hebrew *nazir*, meaning 'set apart.'

They shall separate themselves from wine and strong drink. The Nazirite was forbidden to eat or drink anything from the grape vine; this was a form of self-denial connected with the idea of a special consecration to God. Generally speaking, wine and grape products were thought to be a blessing: <<*Honour the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine*>> (Proverbs 3:9-10), something to be gratefully received from God: <<*You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart*>> (Psalm 104:14-15).

<sup>5</sup> All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head; until the time is completed for which they separate themselves to the Lord, they shall be holy; they shall let the locks of the head grow long.

#### Numbers 6:5

All the days of their nazirite vow no razor shall come upon the head. The hair was to be allowed to grow throughout the period of the vow, and then cut at the conclusion of the vow. This was a way of outwardly demonstrating to the world that this man or woman was under a special vow. In the case of Samson, his strength came from his Nazirite's vow of consecration and separation to God, so when Delilah cut his hair, the most public, visible example of the vow, his strength was lost. Samson had broken the vow before, both by probably drinking alcohol at a feast: <<*His father went down to the woman, and Samson made a feast there as the young men were accustomed to do*>> (Judges 14:10), and deliberately

touching a dead carcass: <<After a while he returned to marry her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion, and there was a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey. He scraped it out into his hands, and went on, eating as he went. When he came to his father and mother, he gave some to them, and they ate it. But he did not tell them that he had taken the honey from the carcass of the lion>> (Judges 14:8-9). However, allowing his hair to be cut in the way that he did made the outcome a much more public affair. There is a sense in which public sins do matter more, because they ultimately bring more reproach to the name of God.

<sup>6</sup> All the days that they separate themselves to the Lord they shall not go near a corpse.

### Numbers 6:6

They shall not go near a corpse. Dead bodies, even those of a close relative, were not to be approached during the vow of a Nazirite. Separation from death, the effect of sin, was essential during the period of the vow. This is a stipulation that was not even as strict for the priests who could tend to close relatives in death: <<The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; likewise, for a virgin sister, close to him because she has had no husband, he may defile himself for her>> (Leviticus 21:1-3).

### I.d.iv.2 Numbers 6:7-12 - Nazirites and uncleanness

Death was a source of severe uncleanness, and contact with death compromised the Nazirite's status. It had to be remedied by offering three sacrifices, i.e. sin, burnt, and guilt-offerings (Leviticus 1:14-16 and 5:7-16), and by starting the period of the Nazirite vow all over again: <<the former time shall be void>> (v.12). It is probably the issue of uncleanness that prompts the inclusion of the laws on the Nazirite at this point in the book, as the start of this particular section indicates: <<Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous, or has a discharge, and everyone who is unclean through contact with a corpse; you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them. The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did>> (Numbers 5:2-4).

<sup>7</sup> Even if their father or mother, brother or sister, should die, they may not defile themselves; because their consecration to God is upon the head. <sup>8</sup> All their days as nazirites they are holy to the Lord.

## Numbers 6:7-8

Because their consecration to God is upon the head. The word here translated consecration or separation, Hebrew *nezer*, is also used of the high priest's crown: <<And he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden ornament, the holy crown, as the Lord commanded Moses>> (Leviticus 8:9). Both the priestly crown and the Nazirite's uncut hair reminded other people of their dedication to God's service. In this way the dedication of the Nazirites was a challenge to every Israelite to follow the Lord wholeheartedly.

<sup>9</sup> If someone dies very suddenly nearby, defiling the consecrated head, then they shall shave the head on the day of their cleansing; on the seventh day they shall shave it. <sup>10</sup> On the eighth day they shall bring two turtle-doves or two young pigeons to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting, <sup>11</sup> and the priest shall offer one as a sin-offering and the other as a burnt-offering, and make atonement for them, because they incurred guilt by reason of the corpse. They shall sanctify the head that same day, <sup>12</sup> and separate themselves to the Lord for their days as nazirites, and bring a male lamb a year old as a guilt-offering. The former time shall be void, because the consecrated head was defiled.

## Numbers 6:9-12

If someone dies very suddenly nearby. If one's vow was broken, perhaps by someone dropping dead next to the Nazirite, then the Nazirite's hair was to be shaved off, sacrifice made, and the vow would begin all over again.

The former time shall be void, because the consecrated head was defiled. The Mishna relates how Queen Helena had almost completed seven years of a Nazirite vow when she was defiled and therefore had to keep it for another seven years.

Helena was queen of Adiabene, part of the Assyrian empire and located in modern day Iraq; she was the wife of Monobaz I. With her husband she was the mother of Izates II and Monobaz II. Helena became a convert to Judaism around the year AD 30. The names of some of her family members and the fact that she was married to her brother indicate an Iranian, Zoroastrian or Magian origin. She lived in Jerusalem and donated significant funds to the Temple.

### I.d.iv.3 Numbers 6:13-20 - Completion of a Nazirite vow

When the period to which Nazirites had dedicated themselves was over, they had to bring three animal sacrifices, i.e. burnt, sin, and peace-offerings (Leviticus 1:10-13, 4:32-35 and 3:6-11 respectively), and the customary accompanying grain

and drink-offerings (Leviticus 2:4-13 and Numbers 15:1-10). Finally, the Nazirite shaved his head and burned his hair on the altar. His unshaven head marked his dedication to God and, by burning the hair, he symbolically gave himself to God. The shoulder of the ram is given to the priest, in addition to his usual share of the sacrifice, i.e. the breast and the thigh, as required in Leviticus 7:31-34.

<sup>13</sup> This is the law for the nazirites when the time of their consecration has been completed: they shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, <sup>14</sup> and they shall offer their gift to the Lord, one male lamb a year old without blemish as a burnt-offering, one ewe lamb a year old without blemish as a sin-offering, one ram without blemish as an offering of well-being, <sup>15</sup> and a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of choice flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil, with their grain-offering and their drink-offerings.

#### Numbers 6:13-15

They shall be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting. The vow of a Nazirite ended with a public ceremony, with extensive sacrifice: one male lamb, one ewe lamb, one ram, unleavened bread, cakes, wafers, grain-offerings and drink-offerings.

They shall offer their gift to the Lord. No wonder when Paul visited Jerusalem, he was invited to pay the expenses of some Christians who had taken a Nazirite vow and were ready to conclude it with this sacrifice: <<*So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law*>> (Acts 21:23-24). The Nazirite vow was not something that could be entered into lightly.

<sup>16</sup> The priest shall present them before the Lord and offer their sin-offering and burnt-offering, <sup>17</sup> and shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of well-being to the Lord, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest also shall make the accompanying grain-offering and drink-offering.

<sup>18</sup> Then the nazirites shall shave the consecrated head at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and shall take the hair from the consecrated head and put it on the fire under the sacrifice of well-being. <sup>19</sup> The priest shall take the shoulder of the ram, when it is boiled, and one unleavened cake out of the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and shall put them in the palms of the nazirites, after they have shaved the consecrated head. <sup>20</sup> Then the priest shall elevate them as an

elevation-offering before the Lord; they are a holy portion for the priest, together with the breast that is elevated and the thigh that is offered. After that the nazirites may drink wine.

#### Numbers 6:16-20

The priest shall present them before the Lord. The priest and the Nazirite would sacrifice each item, and at the conclusion of the sacrifice, the vow would be completed.

#### I.d.iv.4 Numbers 6:21 - Summary of the law

If the ex-Nazirite had pledged to do more than keep the Nazirite abstention rules (vv.3-7), he must fulfil those pledges too.

<sup>21</sup> This is the law for the nazirites who take a vow. Their offering to the Lord must be in accordance with the nazirite vow, apart from what else they can afford. In accordance with whatever vow they take, so they shall do, following the law for their consecration.

#### Numbers 6:21

Their offering to the Lord must be in accordance with the nazirite vow, apart from what else they can afford. This shows the seriousness of a Nazirite vow. Even the poorer members of society had to make the offerings in full before they could be consecrated in the sight of God for this service. This differs from other offerings, such as dedicating a firstborn son, where poorer families could offer a cheaper gift: *<<But if you cannot afford a sheep, you shall bring to the Lord, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a sin-offering and the other for a burnt-offering>>* (Leviticus 5:7). This was best demonstrated at the dedication of Jesus: *<<When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons'>>* (Luke 2:22-24). The sacrifices required were the minimum that a person should offer and they were encouraged to give more if they could afford to do so.

#### I.d.v Numbers 6:22-27 - The Priestly Benediction

Placed here, this famous blessing shows that God's will is to bless every Israelite, not just the Nazirites. But God's blessing is mediated by the priests. The earliest archaeological discovery containing the covenantal name of God, Yahweh, in

Jerusalem is a silver amulet containing this priestly blessing. It was found in a Judæan tomb dating to the Seventh or Sixth Century BC.

<sup>22</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>23</sup> Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,

### Numbers 6:22-23

Thus you shall bless the Israelites. Moses, Aaron, his sons and their spiritual descendants were commanded to bless the people, and they were to do it according to the formula detailed in the following verses: <<*Then the priests, the sons of Levi, shall come forward, for the Lord your God has chosen them to minister to him and to pronounce blessings in the name of the Lord, and by their decision all cases of dispute and assault shall be settled*>> (Deuteronomy 21:5), and: <<*The sons of Amram: Aaron and Moses. Aaron was set apart to consecrate the most holy things, so that he and his sons for ever should make offerings before the Lord, and minister to him and pronounce blessings in his name for ever*>> (1 Chronicles 23:13).

You shall say to them. It is unusual to have a rote prayer given in the Scriptures. Spurgeon commented: “Free prayer is most useful, and it will ordinarily consort best with the movements of the free Spirit; but in the case of a benediction, it is well that it was dictated to the man of God. The children of Israel might miss blessing through the ignorance, or forgetfulness, or unbelief of Aaron; and therefore it was not left to him; but he had to learn by heart each word and sentence. In this wise, and in no other, was he to bless the people. I like this; for if God himself puts the very words into the mouth of his priest, then they are God’s words.”

<sup>24</sup> The Lord bless you and keep you;

### Numbers 6:24

The Lord bless you. This simple desire prefaces everything. God loves to bless his people, and he loves to have leaders long for the people to be blessed. This also recognises that all blessing really comes from God; and without his blessing, all is futile. God blesses by giving good harvests, peace, children, and his own presence: <<*Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out*>> (Deuteronomy 28:3-6); refer also to Leviticus 26:3-13 and the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12.

Keep is to guard and protect. To be kept by the Lord is blessing indeed. Some are kept by their own sin and desire, some are kept by idolatry and greed, and others

are kept by their own bitterness and anger. However, to be kept by the Lord ensures life, peace, and success. It was something David desired: *<<Keep me as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings>>* (Psalm 17:8 NIV).

<sup>25</sup> the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

### Numbers 6:25

The Lord make his face to shine upon you. God's presence is like sunshine; refer to Psalm 19:1-11. A shining face is a smiling face, a pledge of God's good favour, as noted in Psalm 80:3-19.

And be gracious to you provides the image that God shows tender mercy and care for his people. It was the benediction of one brother to another: *<<Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!>>* (Genesis 43:29), and the desire of a king for himself: *<<Put false ways far from me; and graciously teach me your law>>* (Psalm 119:29).

<sup>26</sup> the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

### Numbers 6:26

The countenance is the face or the expression of one's face. For God to lift up his countenance involves taking notice of and treating his people with favour: *<<There are many who say, 'O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!>>* (Psalm 4:6).

The expression peace, the Hebrew word *shalom*, has a much richer connotation than the English word does, since it conveys, not merely the absence of conflict and turmoil, but also the notion of positive blessing, especially in terms of a right relationship with God, and, as a result, the idea that 'all is well' in one's life. This may be manifested most clearly amid persecution and tribulation. It is a gift given by Jesus to his followers: *<<Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid>>* (John 14:27).

<sup>27</sup> So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.

### Numbers 6:27

So they shall put my name on the Israelites. For a person to be blessed by God is to have his name on them: to be identified with who he is and all of his nature. What a gift, to have God's name on them! Aaron was commanded to pronounce this blessing over the people of Israel, not over the other nations. Although God blesses all mankind, there is a definite and strong sense in which he has blessing

only for his people. People need to be joined to him through Christ in order to gain that same blessing today.

**And I will bless them.** God promises to bless in response to this blessing! How appropriate for pastors to pronounce these words over the people in their congregations! How much more appropriate for every believer to remember that they have a High Priest in heaven who ever lives to intercede for them and to bless them: *<<Consequently he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever. Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent that the Lord, and not any mortal, has set up>>* (Hebrews 7:25-8:2).