



Numbers - Chapter Nine

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

Summary of Chapter Nine

The Lord commands that Moses institute the Passover Festival on the first anniversary of his leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery. This raised an issue for some of the people were ceremonially unclean as they had been handling corpses. So Moses asked the Lord for a ruling and he graciously allowed anyone unclean at the time of the Passover, or who was away on a journey, to celebrate the Passover one month later on the fourteenth day of the second month of the year.

When the Israelites were encamped the cloud representing God's presence was over the tabernacle, giving the appearance of fire by night. All the time the cloud was over the tabernacle the Israelites would remain in their camp. As soon as the cloud lifted this was a sign that they were to march and they did so until the cloud descended again.

I.h Numbers 9:1-14 - The Passover at Sinai

God instructs Moses to celebrate the first anniversary of their escape from Egypt by implementing the Passover Festival. He also gave an ordinance that those that were ceremonially unclean or away on a journey could celebrate Passover one month after the official date, i.e. on the fourteenth day of the second month.

I.h.i Numbers 9:1-5 - The Second Passover

The first Passover took place in Egypt just before the Israelites escaped. It was unique in that it occurred before the saving event of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea; all subsequent Passover celebrations recalled these momentous events, but inevitably many of the features of the first Passover were missing. So

this Passover, celebrated a year later at Sinai, was the first of many that were essentially retrospective commemorations of the first Passover in Egypt. The dates given place the celebration of the Passover between the events described in Chapters 7-8 and the censuses of Chapters 1-4.

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: ² Let the Israelites keep the passover at its appointed time. ³ On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its regulations you shall keep it. ⁴ So Moses told the Israelites that they should keep the passover. ⁵ They kept the passover in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai. Just as the Lord had commanded Moses, so the Israelites did.

Numbers 9:1-5

The first month of the second year marked the first anniversary of their departure from Egypt heading for the Promised Land. Unknown to them they still had thirty nine more years of wandering in the wilderness.

Let the Israelites keep the passover at its appointed time. Israel celebrated Passover as they were leaving Egypt (Exodus Chapter 12). As it was stipulated to be an annual festival to remind them of what God had done it was now time to institute God's will.

You shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its regulations you shall keep it. Passover was meant to be a reminder of God's 'passing over' Israel in the judgement of the firstborn at the Exodus from Egypt. The blood of the lamb, applied to the door posts of the Israelite's homes, would be seen by the angel of God's judgement, and seeing the blood, the angel would 'pass over' and spare the home covered by the blood. Passover was meant to be a continual reminder of this occasion of being spared judgement, and of the deliverance that followed in the Exodus. Jesus fulfilled the Passover sacrifice by his death on the Cross: **<<Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed>>** (1 Corinthians 5:7); the covering of his blood causes the judgement of God to 'pass over' those who are committed to him. Christians are commanded to continually remember their occasion of being spared judgement and the deliverance that followed, by remembering Jesus' work on the Cross through the Lord's Supper.

I.h.ii Numbers 9:6-14 - The Delayed Passover

The regular Passover of the 'first month' was carried out properly (v.5), but some people could not participate because they were ceremonially unclean through contact with a corpse. Death is one of the more potent sources of uncleanness; refer to Chapter 19.

As explained in Chapter 5, uncleanness prevents those affected from living in the camp, let alone participating in worship. However, failure to celebrate the Passover when one is able to do so is a serious sin, meriting being cut off (v.13). 'Cut off' probably means dying suddenly and mysteriously as a divine punishment, although some interpreters think it sometimes may refer to excommunication from Israel or judicial execution. Those affected by uncleanness were allowed to keep it one month later than usual, following the standard procedures (vv.11-12).

Resident aliens, although not obliged to keep the Passover, are welcome to observe it if they so desire. They are expected to observe the Sabbath and the Day of Atonement; refer to Exodus 20:10 and Leviticus 16:29 respectively.

⁶ Now there were certain people who were unclean through touching a corpse, so that they could not keep the passover on that day. They came before Moses and Aaron on that day, ⁷ and said to him, 'Although we are unclean through touching a corpse, why must we be kept from presenting the Lord's offering at its appointed time among the Israelites?' ⁸ Moses spoke to them, 'Wait, so that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you.'

Numbers 9:6-8

Now there were certain people who were unclean through touching a corpse, so that they could not keep the passover on that day. In response to this matter, it was determined that the unclean must not neglect to keep Passover. Since Passover was a reminder and identification with spared judgement and deliverance, it must always be remembered. However, the unclean had to wait one month and keep Passover on the fourteenth day of the second month (v.11).

Wait, so that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you. The people made no attempt to seek God for themselves but came to Moses: <<*Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God'*>> (Exodus 18:15). Moses too made no attempt to make a judgement on his own but rightly sought the Lord first: <<*Moses brought their case before the Lord*>> (Numbers 27:5), and: <<*Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts*>> (Psalm 85:8).

These were probably not the only people in Israel who had defiled themselves at the time of the Passover. Perhaps others who became ceremonially unclean did not come forward because they saw it as an excuse to not participate, or perhaps they just wanted to keep a low profile. However, the people who did present themselves as unclean wanted to participate in the Passover, and are bold enough to ask Moses, and therefore to ask God through Moses, for an exception to the previous commands recorded in Leviticus 7:20 and 22:3. Thus, provision was made for the unclean to remember God's spared judgement and deliverance, and the unclean needed to remember it more than anyone else.

⁹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹⁰ Speak to the Israelites, saying: Anyone of you or your descendants who is unclean through touching a corpse, or is away on a journey, shall still keep the passover to the Lord. ¹¹ In the second month on the fourteenth day, at twilight, they shall keep it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ¹² They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it; according to all the statute for the passover they shall keep it. ¹³ But anyone who is clean and is not on a journey, and yet refrains from keeping the passover, shall be cut off from the people for not presenting the Lord's offering at its appointed time; such a one shall bear the consequences for the sin. ¹⁴ Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the passover to the Lord shall do so according to the statute of the passover and according to its regulation; you shall have one statute for both the resident alien and the native.

Numbers 9:9-14

They shall leave none of it until morning, nor break a bone of it. It was according to another law and tradition that Jesus' body was not left on the Cross overnight but its removal, and the fact that his bones were not broken along with those of the other two with him, is relevant to the crucifixion account: <<*Then the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and of the other who had been crucified with him. But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth.) These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'None of his bones shall be broken.'* And again another passage of scripture says, 'They will look on the one whom they have pierced'>> (John 19:32-37).

But anyone who is clean and is not on a journey, and yet refrains from keeping the passover. However, those among Israel who were clean and not travelling must keep Passover, or be cut off from the people. The punishment for not keeping Passover was severe: that man shall bear his sin, instead of having it borne by the Passover lamb. In the same pattern, Christians must partake of Jesus, or bear their own sin: <<*So Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them'*>> (John 6:53-56).

Any alien residing among you who wishes to keep the passover to the Lord shall do so. Additionally, it did not matter what bloodline or ethnic group the person came from: even resident aliens could participate in the Passover celebrations, providing they met all the requirements or they too would be cut off. A Jew with the purest bloodlines would be cut off if they neglected Passover; the Gentile would be accepted if they participated in God's Passover. As Paul writes: <<*When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all'*>> (Romans 2:14-16).

According to the statute of the passover. Before Israel could enter into the Promised Land, they must remember what or, more importantly, who got them there. It was the sparing of God's judgement, and his glorious, miraculous deliverance. Promised Land people must always live in remembrance of God's deliverance, and it all flows from the work of Jesus on the Cross.

I.i Numbers 9:15-23 - The Cloud and the Fire

The cloud of God's presence had led the people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai; refer to Exodus 13:21-22 and 19:9-16. This hymn-like passage celebrates the relationship between God and Israel, or at least what that relationship was like when Israel was in an obedient mood. Wherever and whenever the cloud moved, the people followed. At the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out (v.23). The people had to be ready for immediate departure on any day, and they had to follow the Lord every day until the cloud stopped, which required continual obedience to God's visible guidance. Notice, however, the disobedience of the people in Numbers 14:1-4, when they refuse to 'set out' to Canaan, and the disastrous consequences of their disobedience as seen in 14:11-45. However, Chapter 11 already shows that the people did not possess the faith in God that they should have had.

¹⁵ On the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant; and from evening until morning it was over the tabernacle, having the appearance of fire.

Numbers 9:15

On the day the tabernacle was set up. When the tabernacle was originally built God blessed it by showing his presence in the form of the cloud by day and the fire by night; refer to Exodus 40:34-38.

The cloud covered the tabernacle. This visible evidence of God's presence, his glory, Hebrew *Shekhinah*, could be seen by all Israel. In the evening it was having the appearance of fire until morning and thus it gave continual testimony, day and night, to God's presence among his people. Additionally, this was more than proof of God's presence. The cloud by day and the fire by night were actual support, guidance and comfort to Israel. The fire at night was obviously a comfort to Israel in the midst of a dark wilderness, and the cloud by day would be a shade from the hot wilderness sun: <<*The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand*>> (Psalm 121:5).

This cloud of God's *Shekhinah* glory was evident at different times in Israel's history; when Solomon built the temple, the cloud of glory filled the temple: <<*And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord*>> (1 Kings 8:10-11); but when Israel apostatised, and before the temple was destroyed by the conquering Babylonians, the cloud of glory departed: <<*Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the house when the man went in; and a cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the Lord rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the Lord*>> (Ezekiel 10:3-4), and: <<*Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house and stopped above the cherubim. The cherubim lifted up their wings and rose up from the earth in my sight as they went out with the wheels beside them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the house of the Lord; and the glory of the God of Israel was above them*>> (Ezekiel 10:18-19). Which would be worse, to have never seen such an amazing visual emblem of God's presence and glory, or to have seen it, and then watch it depart? This is why God so sparingly appeals to people's physical senses with the emblems of his glory; they would be, perhaps rightly, devastated when the emblem is gone. Christians are called to live by faith irrespective of where they are on their journey with God or what is happening in their lives: <<*Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith*>> (Habakkuk 2:4), and: <<*So we are always confident; even though we know that*

while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord – for we walk by faith, not by sight>> (2 Corinthians 5:6-7).

¹⁶ It was always so: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷ Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the Israelites would camp. ¹⁸ At the command of the Lord the Israelites would set out, and at the command of the Lord they would camp. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they would remain in camp. ¹⁹ Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle for many days, the Israelites would keep the charge of the Lord, and would not set out. ²⁰ Sometimes the cloud would remain for a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord they would remain in camp; then according to the command of the Lord they would set out. ²¹ Sometimes the cloud would remain from evening until morning; and when the cloud lifted in the morning, they would set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they would set out. ²² Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, resting upon it, the Israelites would remain in camp and would not set out; but when it lifted they would set out. ²³ At the command of the Lord they would camp, and at the command of the Lord they would set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses.

Numbers 9:16-23

It was always so. Although Israel had been organised and ordered by God; although they had been cleansed, and set apart, and blessed, and giving, and walking in their priesthood, they still had to be guided by God each step of the way to make it to the Promised Land. God had not done all those previous things to make them able to start towards the Promised Land on their own, but to make every step in constant dependence on him.

Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, then the Israelites would set out.

So, when the cloud moved, Israel moved; when the cloud stayed, Israel stayed. They only went where the presence of God led them, and they only stayed where the presence of God stayed. Believers today must, in the same way, be led by the presence of God; when Paul says: *<<And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts>>* (Colossians 3:15), he means the presence of God's peace is to be an umpire or a judge in a believer's heart.