

Thoughts on Numbers Vi, Vii - Part I. Separation to God: Numbers Vi, 1-21

by Hudson Taylor

Hudson Taylor's sermon emphasizes the importance of the Nazarite vow as a model for absolute obedience and separation to God in the Christian life.

Scripture: Numbers 6:1

Topics: "Obedience to God", "Consecration"

Description

Hudson Taylor discusses the institution of the Nazarite vow in Numbers 6, emphasizing God's gracious invitation for individuals to draw near to Him despite Israel's national failures. He highlights the importance of absolute obedience and entire consecration, illustrating that even seemingly trivial matters can reflect our devotion to God. Taylor stresses that true service to God requires sacrifice and that our best efforts are only acceptable through Christ's atonement. He encourages believers to recognize the seriousness of sin and the necessity of cleansing through sacrifice, ultimately pointing to the joy of being accepted in Christ. The sermon concludes with the reminder that our imperfect service is cherished by God when offered in love and sincerity.

Transcript

THE INSTITUTION OF THE ORDER OF NAZARITES.

The first twenty-one verses of Numbers 6 give us an account of the institution and ordinances of the order of Nazarites. And let us note at the outset that this institution, like every other good and perfect gift, came from above; that God Himself gave this privilege, unasked, to His people; thereby showing His desire that "whosoever will" of His people may be brought into closest relationship to Himself.

It was very gracious of God to permit His people to become Nazarites. Israel might have been "a kingdom of priests;" but through their own sin they had nationally forfeited this privilege, and a special family had been set apart to the priesthood. God, however, still opened the way for individuals who wished to draw near to Him to do so, and for any period which their own hearts might dictate.

But it is important to notice that though the vow might only be one of temporary consecration, yet it involved while it lasted an

ABSOLUTE ACCEPTANCE

of the will of God, even in regard to matters which might appear trivial and unimportant. So, in the present day, God is willing to give to His people fullness of blessing, but it must be on His own lines. Though we are not our own, it is, alas! Possible to live as though we were; devotion to God is still a voluntary thing; hence the differences of attainment among Christians. While salvation is a free gift, the "winning Christ" can only be through unreserved consecration and unquestioning obedience. Nor is this a hardship, but the highest privilege.

Let us now look into the law of the Nazarite.

IMPLICIT OBEDIENCE: Verses 3, 4.

"He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is made of the vine tree, from the kernels even to the husk."

The first thing that we note is, that as the obedience of Adam was tested in the Garden by the prohibition of one tree, a tree pleasant to look upon, and good for food-so was the obedience of the Nazarite tested. He was not forbidden to eat poison berries, nor was he merely required to abstain from the wine and strong drink which might easily become a snare; fresh grapes and dried raisins were equally prohibited. It was not that the thing was harmful in itself, but that the doing the will of God, in a matter of seeming indifference was essential to his acceptance.

Not less true is this of the Christian Nazarite. Whether he eat or drink, or whatsoever he do, the will of God and not self-indulgence must be his one aim. Christians often get into perplexity about worldly allurements by asking, Where is the sin of this, or the danger of that? There may be danger that the questioner cannot see: Satan's baits often skillfully conceal a sharp hook; but supposing that the thing be harmless, it does not follow that it would be pleasing to God, or spiritually helpful.

The fruit of the vine is a type of earth-born pleasures; those who would enjoy Nazarite nearness to God must count His love "better than wine." To win Christ, the apostle Paul gladly suffered the loss of all things, and counted them as dross and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. The things he gave up were not bad things, but good-things that in themselves were gain to him; and Christ Himself for our redemption emptied Himself, and came to seek not His own, but the will of Him that sent Him.

The highest service demands the greatest sacrifice, but it secures the fullest blessing and the greatest fruitfulness. Christ could not remain in His Father's bosom and redeem the world; missionaries cannot win the heathen and enjoy their home surroundings; nor can they be adequately sustained without the loving sacrifices of many friends and donors. You, dear reader, know the Master's choice; what is yours? Is it to do His will even if it mean to leave all for Him, to give all to Him?

ENTIRE CONSECRATION: Verse 5.

"All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head; until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow."

We have already seen that God tested the obedience of the Nazarite in the matter of food: pleasing God was rather to be chosen than the most tempting cluster of grapes. But in the foregoing words we find that his obedience is further tested, and this in a way which to many might prove a more severe trial. God claims the right of determining the personal appearance of His servant, and directs that separated ones should be manifestly such. To many minds there is the greatest shrinking from appearing peculiar; but God would often have His people unmistakably peculiar. We sometimes hear the argument, "all the world" thinks this, or does that, given as a reason for our doing likewise; but that is an argument that should have no weight with the Christian, who is commanded not to be conformed to the world. While we are not to seek to be peculiar for its own sake, we are not to hesitate to be so when duty to God renders it necessary, or when the privilege of self-denial for the benefit of others calls for it.

Further, this command again reminded the Nazarite that he was not his own, but was utterly the Lord's; that God claimed the very hair of his head. He was not at liberty to cut or trim it as he saw fit, nor to wear it as long or as short as might be agreeable to himself. So absolute was God's claim upon him, that not merely while his vow lasted was that hair to be recognized as God's possession, but when his vow was fulfilled the whole of it was to be shaved off, and was to be burnt upon the altar. Like the burnt-offering, it was to be recognized as for God's use alone, whether or not any utilitarian purpose were accomplished by the sacrifice.

So now, in the present dispensation, we are told "the very hairs of your head are all numbered"-so minute is God's care for His people, so watchful is He over all that affects them. It is beautiful to see the fond love of a young mother as she passes her fingers through the silken locks of her darling child, her treasure and her delight; but she never counts those hairs. He only, who is the source of mother-love, does that! And shall not we, who are not our own, but bought with a price, gladly render to Him all we are and have, every member of our body, every fiber of our being, every faculty of our mind, all our will-power, and all our love?

HOLINESS TO THE LORD: Verses 6-8.

"All the days that he separateth himself unto the Lord he shall come at no dead body. He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die; because the consecration of his God is upon his head. All the days of his separation he is holy unto the Lord."

Here we have a most solemn and important prohibition, to refrain from all uncleanness caused by contact with death. Death is the wages of sin: the consecrated one was alike to keep aloof from sin and from its consequences.

No requirement of God's Word is more clear than the command to honor and obey our earthly parents; but even for his father or mother a Nazarite might not defile himself: "he that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me."

But let no young Christian think lightly of the requirements of parents, when these do not conflict with God's written Word. Young Christians are sometimes distressed because their desire to preach the Gospel to the heathen has been opposed by parents: such should be encouraged to thank God for the obstacle; and to seek by prayer its removal. When they have learnt to move man through God at home, they will be the better prepared to do the same thing in the mission field. Where there is fitness for the work, the way will probably be made plain after a time of patient waiting.

These verses teach us that mere contact with death is defiling: how vain then is the imagination of the unconverted that by dead works, the best efforts of those who are themselves dead in trespasses and sins, they can render themselves acceptable to God! The good works of the unsaved may indeed benefit their fellow-creatures; but until life in Christ has been received, they cannot please God.

UNWITTING DEFILEMENT: Verse 9-12.

"If any man die very suddenly by him, and he hath defiled the head of his consecration; then he shall shave his head in the day of his cleansing, on the seventh day shall he shave it. And on the eighth day he shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons, to the priest, to the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the priest shall offer the one for a sin-offering, and the other for a burnt-offering, and make an atonement for him, for that he sinned by the dead, and shall hallow his head that same day. And he shall consecrate unto the Lord the days of his separation, and shall bring a lamb of the first year for a trespass-offering: but the days that were before shall be lost, because his separation was defiled."

A most important truth is here taught, that even unwitting contact with death might bring sin upon the Nazarite. Sometimes we are tempted to excuse ourselves, and to forget the absolute sinfulness of sin, apart altogether from the question of premeditation, or even of consciousness, at the time, on our part. The one who becomes defiled, was defiled, whether intentionally or not; God's requirement was absolute, and where not fulfilled the vow was broken; the sin-offering had to be offered, and the service recommenced.

THE HEINOUSNESS OF SIN.

The teaching here, and that of offerings for sins of ignorance, is much needed in this day, when there is a dangerous tendency in some quarters to regard sin as misfortune, and not as guilt. The awful character of sin is shown to mankind by its consequences. Man's heart is so darkened by the Fall, and by personal sinfulness, that otherwise he would regard sin as a very small matter. But when we think of all the pain that men and women have endured since the Creation, of all the miseries of which this world has been witness, of all the sufferings of the animal creation, and of the eternal as well as a temporal consequences of sin, we must see that that which has brought such a harvest of misery into the world is far more awful than sin-blinded men have thought it to be.

The highest evidence, however, of the terrible character of sin is to be found at the Cross; that it needed such a sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Son of God, to bring in atonement and everlasting salvation, is surely the most convincing proof of its heinous character.

Death was brought into the world by sin; and, like all the other consequences of sin, it is loathsome and defiling. Man seeks to adorn death; the pageantry of the funeral, the attractiveness of the cemetery, all show this. The Egyptian sought in vain to make the mortal body incorruptible by embalming it. But we have to bury our dead out of our sight, and the believer is taught to look forward to the resurrection.

CLEANSING ONLY THROUGH SACRIFICE.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that the accidental death of any one near the Nazarite, that the thoughtless putting forth of the hand even, might violate his vow of consecration as truly, if not as guiltily, as an act of deliberate transgression; in either case all the previous time was lost, and the period of consecration had to be recommenced after his cleansing. And that cleansing could only be brought about through sacrifice;

the sin-offering must die; the burn-offering must die; without shedding of blood there could be no remission. So serious was the effect of transgression, and yet, thank God, it was not irremediable.

The bearing of this on the life of consecration to God in the present day is important. Nearness to God calls for tenderness of conscience, thoughtfulness in service, and implicit obedience. If we become conscious of the slightest failure, even through inadvertence, let us not excuse it, but at once humble ourselves before God, and confess it, seeking forgiveness and cleansing on the ground of the accepted sacrifice of Christ. God's Word is, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This cleansing must be accepted by faith, and a walk "in the light" be at once resumed. And shall we not reverently ask and trust the Holy Spirit to guard and keep us from inadvertence, and to bring to our remembrance those things which we may be in danger of forgetting?

ACCEPTANCE OF CHRIST. Verses 13-15.

"And this is the law of the Nazarite, when the days of his separation are fulfilled: he shall be brought unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation; And he shall offer his offering unto the Lord, one he-lamb of the first year without blemish for a burnt-offering, and one ewe-lamb of the first year without blemish for a sin-offering, and one ram without blemish for peace-offerings, and a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mingled with oil, and wafers of unleavened bread anointed with oil, and their meat-offering, and their drink-offerings."

Having seen the character of the vow of the Nazarite, and of the ordinances to be observed should the vow be violated, the case of a Nazarite who has duly fulfilled his vow is next dealt with. He has carried out all God's requirements, and his conscience is void of offence: before God and man he is blameless. May he now congratulate himself, and claim some measure of merit, seeing he has rendered to God an acceptable service, and among men has borne a consistent testimony? The offerings to be made on the conclusion of his vow give an impressive answer to this question, and bring out the important difference between being blameless and being sinless. Having fulfilled the ordinances he was blameless; but the necessity alike for sin-offering, for burnt-offering, and for peace-offering, remind us of the sin of our holy things; and that not our worst, but our best, is only acceptable to God through the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ.

While, however, the best services of the believer can neither give full satisfaction to his own enlightened conscience, nor be acceptable to God save through Jesus Christ, it is very blessed to know how fully all his needs are met in Christ, and how truly he is accepted in Him, and enabled to give very real joy to God our Father, which issues in the bestowal of His richest blessings. Very imperfect, sometimes worse than useless, is the attempt of a little child to please and serve its parent; but where the parent sees an effort to do his will, and to give him pleasure, is not the service gladly accepted, and the parent's heart greatly rejoiced? Thus it is our privilege to be Nazarites, only and always Nazarites, and through Christ Jesus to give joy and satisfaction by our imperfect service to our heavenly Father. The following anonymous lines, taken from a leaflet, (Published under the title, "The Voice in the Twilight," by Holiness, 14, Paternoster Row, 6d per hundred, post free.) beautifully illustrate this thought:--

I was sitting alone in the twilight,

With spirit troubled and vexed,

With thoughts that were morbid and gloomy,

And faith that was sadly perplexed.
Some homely work I was doing
For the child of my love and care;
Some stitches half-wearily setting
In the endless need of repair.
But my thoughts were about "the building,"
The work some day to be tried;
And that only the gold and the silver
And the precious stones should abide;
And, remembering my own poor efforts,
The wretched work I had done,
And, even when trying most truly,
The meager success I had won;
"It is nothing but wood, hay, and stubble,"
I said; "it will all be burned--
This useless fruit of the talents
One day to be returned;
"And I have so longed to serve Him,
And sometimes I know I have tried;
But I'm sure, when He sees such a building,
He will never let it abide."
Just then, as I turned the garment
That no rent should be left behind,
My eye caught an odd little bungle
Of mending and patchwork combined.
My heart grew suddenly tender,
And something blinded my eyes,

With one of those sweet intuitions
That sometimes makes us so wise.
Dear child, she wanted to help me;
I knew 'twas the best she could do;
But oh, what a botch she had made it--
The grey mis-matching the blue!
And yet, can you understand it?
With a tender smile and a tear,
And a half-compassionate yearning,
I felt her grown more dear.
Then a sweet voice broke the silence,
And the dear Lord said to me--
"Art thou tenderer for the little child
Than I am tender for thee."
Then straightway I knew His meaning,
So full of compassion and love;
And my faith came back to its Refuge,
Like the glad returning dove.
For I thought when the Master Builder
Comes down His temple to view,
To see what rents must be mended,
And what must be builded anew;
Perhaps, as He look so'er the building,
he will bring my work to the light,
And, seeing the marring and bungling,
And how far it all is from right,
He will feel as I felt for my darling,

And will say as I said for her--
Dear child, she wanted to help me,
And love for me was the spur;
"And, for the real love that was in it,
The work shall seem perfect as mine;
And because it was willing service,
I will crown it with plaudit divine."
And there, in the deepening twilight,
I seemed to be clasping a Hand,
And to feel a great love constraining me,
Stronger than any command.
Then I knew, by the thrill of sweetness,
'Twas the hand of the Blessed One,
Which would tenderly guide and hold me,
Till all the labor is done.
So my thoughts are never more gloomy,
My faith no longer is dim;
But my heart is strong and restful,
And mine eyes are unto Him.

THE PRESENTATION OF THE NAZARITE.

Let us now look into the law of the Nazarite when the days of his separation were fulfilled. The first thing that strikes our notice is, "He shall be brought," not, he shall come. Why is this? And why is it that the law is so explicit as to every detail of ritual and service, scarcely leaving any room for voluntary action? we say scarcely, because in the twenty-first verse there is one little clause, "Beside that that his hand shall get," which does leave room for additional tokens of gratitude and love.

The answer seems to be, that the voluntary part of Nazarite service lay first and chiefly in the surrender to become a Nazarite. In that position he was not his own, as we have pointed out, and the Master whom he served naturally and consistently directed the service.

Again, does not, "He shall be brought" imply that, Nazarite as he was, he still needed priestly ministration to present himself, and his finished service, before the Lord? And our High Priest, who is now able to keep us from falling to the end of our surrendered service, waits to present us with exceeding joy, "faultless

before the presence of His glory"--"holy and unblameable and unreprouable in His sight."

THE LAW OF THE OFFERINGS.

When we come to the offerings enumerated in verse 14, we notice that they are mentioned in the almost invariable order of enumeration, first the burnt-offering, then the sin-offering, and lastly the peace offering; but when in verse 1 we come to the offering up of the sacrifices, we notice that as always the sin-offering is the first to be offered.

It is somewhat remarkable that the actual order of offering, and the order of enumeration should not correspond; and it is likewise noteworthy that the sacrifice which was always offered first, when offered at all, was comparatively insignificant in point of value, and much less frequently called for in the services of the Levitical ritual. For instance, in Numbers 28, 29, the daily offering was a burnt-offering of a he-lamb morning and evening, with the corresponding accompaniments of fine flour mingled with oil, and a drink-offering of wine. On the Sabbath Day an additional burnt-offering of two lambs with their meat-offering and drink-offering was required. At the time of the new moon, the additional offering was of two bullocks, one ram, and seven lambs, with their meat and drink-offerings, for a burnt-offering, while one he-goat sufficed for a sin-offering. The same offerings were offered at the Feasts of Passover and Pentecost. On several other occasions the offerings were nearly of the same proportions; while during the Feast of Tabernacles the offerings commenced with thirteen bullocks, two rams, and fourteen lambs for a burnt-offering to one he-goat for a sin-offering.

The same disproportion of number and value may be noticed on many occasions between the sin-offering and the peace offering. A striking example of this was the sacrifice of peace-offerings made by Solomon on the dedication of the temple to the number of 22,000 oxen, and 120,000 sheep.

We cannot but see that teaching of the most important character is to be gathered from these facts; and is it not clear that while the need of forgiveness and cleansing is never to be lost sight of, it is not intended that a sense of the presence and defilement of sin should be the prominent feature of the service of God? On the great Day of Atonement Israel's sin was confessed and put away; and thenceforward the daily and the Sabbath worship was that of whole burnt-offering. At the special festivals a he-goat was sacrificed for sin; but, as we have seen, the burnt-offerings, which speak of acceptance by, and devotion to, God were the principal features. It is the purpose of God that in the present dispensation His people should have and enjoy full assurance of salvation through the offering of Jesus Christ once for all; and more than this, should know that He who "died for their offences, and was raised again for their justification," henceforth "liveth unto God;" in order that His people may likewise "reckon themselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God, in Jesus Christ our Lord." In Jesus Christ there is no condemnation. In Jesus Christ, the law of the spirit of life hath set me "free from the law of sin and of death." By the will of God "we are sanctified, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all;" and by "that one offering He hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified."

THE BURNT-OFFERING.

To return to the order of enumeration: the burnt-offering is always mentioned first, because it is the highest in character, and gave most pleasure to God. It was wholly the Lord's; no part of it was eaten by the priest who offered it, nor by the offerer who presented it, it was all and only for God's satisfaction. When Noah offered his burnt-offering, the Lord smelled a sweet savor, and blessed him and his posterity. When Abraham in purpose offered up his son Isaac, God said, "By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for

because thou hast done this thing,...that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed;...and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

The burnt-offering tells us of the perfect and accepted righteousness of Christ, in virtue of which the imperfect believer and his imperfect service are accepted by God. But it also reminds the believer of his privilege to surrender himself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is to be the reasonable (intelligent) service (that is, ritual or worship) of each day and hour.

THE SIN-OFFERING AND THE PEACE-OFFERING.

The sin-offering, as its name indicates, recognized the offerer as guilty and defiled, but obtaining forgiveness and cleansing through the death of the victim in his stead. We see Christ as our sin-offering in Isaiah 53:4-10. But guilt removed still leaves the believer needing the imputed righteousness of Christ, and acceptance before God, which are the aspects of Christ's death foreshadowed, as we have seen by the burnt-offering.

Lastly, the peace-offering, part of which was consumed on the altar, while part was the portion of the priest, and the remainder furnished a feast to the offerer and his friends, shows us God and man feasting together on the perfect work of Christ. He that sanctifieth and those who are sanctified, find their full satisfaction in Him, and in Him alone. He has made peace by the blood of His cross. He has given us His own peace. We are called to let His peace rule in our hearts. And if we will but bring our burdens and cares to Him, we are promised that the peace of God shall guard and garrison our hearts and thoughts in Christ Jesus!

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