

“An Exceptional Promise”

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Even in the darkest times, God always has people.

Numbers 6:1-12

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The greatest footballer

Edson Arantes was born in Brazil in 1940, named after Thomas Edison, the American inventor. Many believe he was the greatest footballer (soccer player) of all time. Brazil won three FIFA World Cups during his tenure, and he remains the all-time leading scorer for Brazil's national team. In 1999 he was voted World Player of the Century by an international soccer federation, and *Time* magazine included this soccer player in its list of the 100 most important people of the 20th century. He coined the phrase “The Beautiful Game” in reference to soccer.

Edson grew up in poverty in the Brazilian state of Sao Paulo. He couldn't even afford a soccer ball, so he would kick around a grapefruit or a sock stuffed with newspaper. His soccer hero in high school was a guy named Bilé, which he couldn't pronounce correctly. He would call him “Pelé,” and his friends teased him by nicknaming Edson “Pelé.” The name stuck as his career skyrocketed. By age 16 he was a member of the Brazilian national team, and the rest is rather fascinating history.

What adjective would you use to describe this athlete? Was he “special”? You would say so, I think, but “special” doesn't seem strong enough, does it? Remarkable? Amazing? Wonderful? I'm going with “exceptional.” Let me tell you why.

Desert survival

Last week we began a study of the book of Numbers. I got enough feedback this week to know that I'm going to have to work extra hard to convince you of its relevance.

That is especially true if your personal life and relationships at the moment are comparable to a luxury resort in Tahiti. Even if that's the case, I'm going to suggest that you treat Numbers as if your next adventure after Tahiti is a hike across the Mohave Desert. Even though life is good right now, how will you prepare for scarcity?

Lying on the Tahiti beach, you're going to visualize the desert. You're going to pick up a book like *Desert Survival: Tips, Tricks, and Skills*. That's how I want you to see Numbers. Expect it to be "dry." It is, after all, about spending forty years in the desert. It's a whole book about dry, both literally and figuratively as a metaphor for the dry seasons of life. Expect Numbers to equip you for a time of life when you will feel isolated and disoriented with inadequate resources – whether or not that's now.

We started last week in chapter 1 with the first census. Men of fighting age are counted in every tribe except the tribe of Levi. We learned that to whatever degree Numbers is about numbers, it is about numbers that teach us about God. In chapter 1 we learn three lessons about God. 1. God speaks. 2. God counts – every person. 3. God divides to unite. In other words, God separates his people into smaller groups to form communities with affinity and purpose and accountability.

We skipped over a few chapters to get to chapter 6 today. Chapter 2 is about organizing the camp spatially, with three tribes on each side and the Tabernacle in the middle. Levite families surround the Tabernacle because that's where they serve and that's what they protect. In chapters 3-4, the Levites are also counted and are assigned special tasks. Chapter 5 is about the purity of the camp. One section is about quarantine for infectious diseases (that seems relevant!) and another is about sexual purity. There's so much more we could say about any of those, but we won't.

A special vow

We come to chapter 6, and we're not surprised that it begins, "The LORD spoke to Moses" (1). As I said, that's a theme in Numbers.

What's surprising is the next line: "Speak to the Israelites and say to them, 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow....'" What's going on here? Remember, we've just spent one chapter counting all the potential soldiers – able-bodied males over the age of 20 – and then three more chapters counting and directing the Levites, who are men between the ages of 30 and 50 (4:46-50) with responsibility to serve in and transport God's home. About a third of the camp is eligible for war. A much smaller number is privileged to care for the Tabernacle. What about everyone else? If someone who's not a fighter, not a priest, not even an adult male, has a special passion to love and serve God, how does he or she demonstrate that?

The answer is that this person, male or female, apparently of any age, can make "a special vow." The Hebrew verb used here is *pala* (to do the impossible, exceptional),

and it derives from the noun *pele*, which means a miracle, a wonder, something inexplicable or exceptional.

I found it interesting that the greatest soccer player of all time was nicknamed Pelé by his buddies, but the name turned out to be prophetic. Pelé has no meaning in Portuguese; it's just two syllables. But he was an exceptional athlete. To call him "special" is a significant understatement.

That's how I feel about English translations of Numbers 6:2. "If a man or woman wants to make a special vow..."? Just "special"? The meaning is more, "If a man or woman wants to make *an extraordinary promise*, a vow of dedication to the LORD as a Nazirite." The word "Nazirite" means consecrated or devoted.

When you read through the book of Leviticus, the emphasis is on the holiness of God who sets apart a holy people. "Holy" means different, weird. Jewish people today who take the Torah most seriously are called "orthodox Jews," but in their mind and practice they are ordinary Jews. They're just doing what every Jew should do if they really believe in the books of Moses. To everyone else, they're kind of odd.

Think of all the Jews in the desert during the time of Moses as orthodox Jews. Everybody's weird in what they wear, who they worship, how they keep the Sabbath, the festivals and sacrifices they observe. If you're already part of a peculiar people, and if you can't fight in a war or serve in the Tabernacle, but you really love God and want to make an extraordinary promise to honor him, how can you do that?

This is what being a Nazirite is all about. "OK," God tells Moses, "I like that. Someone wants to stand out in his or her dedication to me. Here's what that will look like."

First, eat or drink nothing from the grapevine – no wine, vinegar, grape juice, grapes, raisins, or even grape seeds or skins (3-4). "Why?" you ask. "What's wrong with a glass of wine – or even just some grape juice or raisins?" What a silly question! We're talking about someone who has said, "I want to go above and beyond. I don't want to be an ordinary, run-of-the-mill orthodox Jew." Pick this precisely because it's a form of self-denial that otherwise is not sinful.

Priests were prohibited from drinking alcohol before they went on duty (Leviticus 10:9), but otherwise could drink wine. Grapes and wine would have been an extreme luxury in the desert, something these wanderers were looking forward to in Canaan. Wine is associated with happy times. Choose this discipline because you're denying a pleasure just because you love the Lord.

Second, no haircuts. Why? Is a razor sinful? No. Once again, there's no justification in the text itself except that "they must let their hair grow long" (5). I think the reason is that this is a public display of your private commitment. Others will know

you are a Nazirite, and this will keep you accountable. Otherwise you might be sitting around the campfire while wine is passed around and you'll drink up, justifying to yourself, "Well, no one really knows I'm a Nazirite anyway."

Third, don't go near a dead body, even if it's a member of your family (6-7). Why? Because you are "consecrated to the LORD" (8). You are embracing the fact that this vow may be costly. It's one thing to avoid dead bodies as a rule, and it's inconvenient for anyone to touch one. But this will cause you to prioritize your vow to God over your own family and emotions.

Further, this rule applies to the entire period of your Nazirite vow. If you break this rule, even by accident, then the clock starts over. If you had promised to be a Nazirite for a year, and on the 364th day you're holding your Mom while she passes, then shave your head, make some offerings to the priest, and start the calendar over at Day 1. Why? Because you knew when you signed up this would be a costly vow for an entire year, not for 364 days, and you didn't make it to the end of your extraordinary promise.

We only read through verse 12, but there's another couple of paragraphs about what to do when the Nazirite vow is complete. There's a ritual involved to returning to ordinary spiritual life. There's nothing wrong about doing so.

Let's review a few key points about the Nazirite vow in Numbers 6 and the rest of the Bible.

First, it's voluntary. Nobody has to do this. No guilt or shame if you don't. It's not for everyone. There are surprisingly few examples of Nazirites in the Bible. The most obvious and memorable is Samson. I'll come back to him in a moment, but he's the only named Nazirite in the Bible – even though some others seem to have taken some Nazirite-like vows, including Samuel, John the Baptist, and the Apostle Paul. The Nazirite vow wasn't common precisely because it was voluntary.

Second, it's temporary. At least that's the assumption in Numbers 6. You accept these restrictions for a limited but definite period of time. Again, Samson is a bit of an exception. Nazirite vows were more like what we call Lenten disciplines – self-denial for a specific period of time.

Third, it's extraordinary. That's the point. You're wanting to exercise a Pelé life. You want to stand out in your dedication to God. Normal won't cut it for you. "Special" isn't strong enough. You're going to make an exceptional promise, do the unexpected, complete the illogical and peculiar disciplines because you love God that much.

Others may, you cannot

What relevance does the Nazirite vow have to us today? We could go to one of two extremes. On the one hand, we can say, "This is God's Word, so let's apply this precisely as written. Anyone who loves God should avoid wine, grape juice, and raisins, should never cut their hair, and should never become an undertaker." I don't know that I've ever heard such a direct application, but I've heard something like it. On the other hand, we can ignore this passage entirely. Either extreme would be a mistake.

Other than Numbers 6 and the story of Samson, the only place in the entire Bible where the word "Nazirite" appears is in Amos. Amos is notable as a lay prophet – not a priest and not even a graduate of the school of prophets. He speaks and writes into the northern kingdom of Israel at the low point of their spiritual life, when God is preparing to bring judgment from the Assyrians. He calls out many sins among the people, including and especially the abuse of power and wealth.

"I also raised up prophets from among your children
and Nazirites from among your youths.
Is this not true, people of Israel?"
declares the LORD.

"But you made the Nazirites drink wine
and commanded the prophets not to prophesy (Amos 2:11-12).

This passage makes two important points. One is that Nazirites need nurture. It really ticks God off when he calls men and women, especially in their youth, to go all out for him, and others mock and diminish and even try to discourage that level of commitment. Positively speaking, God wants us to encourage those who make an extraordinary promise of holiness and service. We should be looking for them, blessing them, encouraging them, supporting them.

This is Confirmation weekend at Corinth, delayed because of the pandemic and even then all the Confirmands couldn't be together for the same service for various reasons. One is even quarantined until a COVID test comes back. These are strange times.

They were all assigned Confirmation partners, but I'm wondering who here will look at those pictures on the front and commit to pray for and encourage one of these young people – or maybe another teenager or adult – for the next ten years or so while they transition into adulthood. I've been doing this long enough to know that these Confirmands are like the soils in Jesus' parable. The devil will snatch away the seed from some of them. Others will hang in there until trials or pleasures get in the way. But some of them will be Nazirites. Their roots will grow deep and their faith will be strong and they will produce fruit. Would you adopt one of them and stay with them through the years ahead? Nazirites need nurture.

The other point is that God always has people. Even in the darkest times of spiritual history, God calls certain individuals to a higher level of service and holiness. We think looking back over biblical and church history that there were dark days where nobody was fully committed to God. Elijah was a contemporary of Amos in Israel, and he wanted to die because he thought he was the only one left. God answered, “I reserve seven thousand in Israel – all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal” (1 Kings 19:18).

Are you one of those people God has? In my view, the purpose of Numbers 6 is to challenge the people of God to something more than an ordinary life. Remember that the Nazirite vow was an over-and-above promise, totally voluntary, for people who as a group were set aside by God as his own. That’s why the Ten Commandments aren’t among the rules for Nazirites. That’s baseline commitment – no other gods, no idols, no profanity, honor your parents, don’t steal or murder or covet. Everybody’s supposed to obey those. The Nazirite vow is about a life that is so much more.

I never wanted to live an ordinary Christian life. I don’t want to come to the end of my life and people say, “He was pretty good as an average Christian. Right there in the middle of the pack. Just about as ordinary as a follower of Jesus.” I’m not telling you I’ve been consistently the best, but I am telling you it’s been my goal. I don’t want to live this life and know that I attended church here and there, was an average husband and father, stood up for the poor and powerless when it was convenient, worked on forgiveness and reconciliation if it didn’t hurt, and helped an old lady cross the street once in a while. I wanted to make and keep an exceptional promise to the Lord.

I realized early on that this meant that I could never compare myself to others. Others would seem holier or smarter or more effective. Or others might seem to get away with more than I could. Linda and I were both deeply influenced by a tract that I referred to in yesterday’s Coronian devotional. Titled “[Others May, You Cannot](#),” it begins, “If God has called you to be really like Jesus, He will draw you into a life of crucifixion and humility, and put upon you such demands of obedience, that you will not be able to follow other people, or measure yourself by other Christians, and in many ways He will seem to let other good people do things which He will not let you do.”

The author goes on to give examples. Others may become more famous, or richer, or more boastful. They might exercise more “freedom” than you do. They might get more credit than you do. But the Holy Spirit won’t let you operate like that.

Here’s how the tract ends: “Now when you are so possessed with the living God that you are, in your secret heart, pleased and delighted over this peculiar, personal, private, jealous guardianship and management of the Holy Spirit over your life, you will have found the vestibule of Heaven.” That’s what it means to take the Nazirite vow. Amen.