

Wait, Ask, and Do

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“God extends his grace into the messy world of reality in which we live.” (Iain Duguid)

Numbers 9:1-14

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The Practical Church Record

I have with me today a copy of “The Practical Church Record” for Corinth that predates electronic records. We didn’t have friendship records or keep attendance notes in years past. We did, however, keep records on membership and communion. Members needed to check in and record their communion, up to four times a year. Some even felt duty-bound to inform us when they had taken communion at another church. One member sent me an annual letter for the first 15 years of my ministry here.

That’s just one example rules about communion in our Reformed tradition. Members should never miss communion. They should never take communion alone. Before communion service, they should attend a preparatory service to confess your sins. They should not participate in a Catholic Mass. Pastor or church leaders should exclude from the Table anyone you know to be unrepentant or unbelieving. Other traditions have more rules, and many have fewer.

If you’re looking for a Bible passage to back up enforcement of rules for the Lord’s Supper, Numbers 9 is a good choice. But it’s a dangerous way to use the Bible.

Rules and regulations (1-5)

As we turn to verse 1, once again the LORD speaks to Moses. It’s been exactly one year since the Israelites came out of Egypt. God says, “Have the Israelites celebrate the Passover at the appointed time. Celebrate it at the appointed time, at twilight on

the fourteenth day of the month, in accordance with all its rules and regulations” (2-3). The “appointed time” is important, as are “all its rules and regulations.”

One year earlier, the Israelites were still in Egypt. Nine plagues had been visited on the Egyptians as God’s judgment and demand that Pharaoh release his slaves: Water turned to blood, frogs, flies, hail, darkness, and four more. Now God was going to strike down the firstborn male of every human and animal family as judgment on the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh will finally release the Israelites.

To ensure that the death angel would “pass over” the homes of the Israelites, the slaves were given a detailed set of “rules and regulations.” This observance was to continue annually from then on. Among the rules laid down in Exodus 12:

- Day 10: Each family must choose a year-old male lamb without defect.
- Day 14: The lamb must be slaughtered at twilight, and roasted, not boiled.
- The lamb’s blood must be smeared on the top and sides of their doorframes.
- The family eats the roasted meat with bitter herbs and unleavened bread.
- The meal must be eaten “in haste,” with everyone dressed for getaway.
- Days 14-21: No one may eat any bread with yeast, or they will be cut off.
- Days 14 and 21: The community will gather for a sacred assembly.

I suspect nobody questioned the first Passover celebration on the way out of Egypt. No one on that terrifying night whined, “Do I have to do this?” “What if I can’t afford it?” “What if I’m not up to it?” Neither did anyone ask, “What if I’m traveling?”

The rules were strict and the rules are the focus in Numbers 9. That’s why I don’t think “celebrate” is the right translation for what they were to do. A more literal translation is to “observe” or “keep” the Passover. It’s not about a party. It’s about doing it right – “at the appointed time” with “all its rules and regulations.”

According to verses 4 and 5, Moses passed on the instructions to the Israelites, and they did as they are instructed. Praise God! They hadn’t always.

“But....” (6-8)

We come to verse 6, which starts with “But....” We’ve also had the book of Leviticus between Exodus and Numbers, and the focus of Leviticus is holiness – being a people separated to God and staying “clean.”

We’ve added other rules and regulations, a bunch of them about being “unclean” – which is not necessarily about sin. There are rules about which animals are clean to eat, rules about diseases, rules about normal body discharges from both men and women, rules about touching things, especially dead bodies. Uncleaness is almost always temporary, for a set period of time. Usually it requires a ceremony for the “unclean” person to be declared “clean.”

Verse 6 begins with “But...” God says to observe it “at the appointed time,” but what if you’re unclean at the appointed time? It would defile Passover to keep it when you’re unclean, but the appointed time is one of the rules and regulations. One of the ways a person became unclean was to touch a dead body. Some of the Israelites came to Moses and asked, “Why should we be kept from presenting the LORD’s offering (the Passover lamb) with the other Israelites at the appointed time” (7)?

Their heart was in the right place. They wanted to obey the Passover law, but they wanted to obey the laws about cleanliness. What if two of God’s laws contradict?

I like Moses’ response. He doesn’t impulsively say, “I’ll tell you what to do.” In this book of regular contact between God and Moses, Moses answers, “Wait until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you” (8).

Grace in a messy world (9-14)

The rest of today’s text gives us God’s answer to Moses. You might think God would say, “You shouldn’t have touched that dead body. You knew Passover was coming. I’m done with you.” Instead, as Pastor Iain Duguid says, “God extends his grace into the messy world of reality in which we live.” He knows there are times when that “messy world of reality” conflicts with his “rules and regulations.” The summary is rather simple.

1. Passover is not optional (10).
2. Uncleaness still applies (10).
3. There are other legitimate reasons you might miss Passover, like being “away on a journey” (10).
4. If unavailable at “the appointed time,” our makeup date is one month later (11).
5. Otherwise, the same rules apply (11-12).
6. If you don’t have an excused absence and you neglect Passover, that is a sin serious enough to be expelled from the community (13).

In verse 14, God adds another sentence to his reply that has nothing to do with the question Moses asked. “A foreigner residing among you” has the same privilege and the same set of responsibilities as the native-born. Moses himself had married “a foreigner.” Preserved by the providence and protection of God as well as the courage and ingenuity of his mother and sister in a little basket among the Nile River bulrushes, Moses had spent his first forty years in Pharaoh’s palace being prepared for his unique role in a way only God could arrange.

When he tried to take his people’s rescue into his own hands, he was forced out of Egypt to preserve his life, and there he married a woman who was a descendant of Abraham, but not of Isaac and Jacob – thus not an Israelite. Zipporah was a Midianite, and later in the book of Numbers we’ll learn that Moses’ own siblings, Aaron and

Miriam, scorned him because she was a Cushite (Numbers 12:1). She was, in our contemporary language, Black. His sons were not circumcised at birth. Even after the burning bush call of God, God threatened Moses with death if he didn't circumcise his sons (Exodus 4:24), and Zipporah gave in.

My point is that this explicit command of God about including the foreigner in the Passover was personal for Moses. This was about his Black wife and his biracial sons. They have the privilege of Passover and must obey the rules and regulations.

A story of grace

So what's the meaning of Numbers 9, the second Passover, for us? In its context, it's all about God's grace. God had so many very legitimate reasons in that first year to abandon these people. Two chapters after the first Passover, as the Egyptian army closed in on them when Pharaoh changed his mind, the Israelites said to Moses, "What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?' It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert" (Exodus 14:11-12).

There was grumbling about no water to drink, and about all the great food they left behind in slavery. While God was giving Moses the Ten Commandments on the mountain, including "You shall have no other gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol," the people were at the base of Mt. Sinai saying to Aaron, "Come make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him" (Exodus 32:1). So they made the golden calf. Really?

God now says to Moses a year after the Exodus, "They're still my peeps. I love them. Tell them to observe this special observance that forever will mark my hand of deliverance. I'm not done with them." That's all grace.

There's not only grace in the Passover itself, but grace in the "rules and regulations." When you've been slaves for 400 years, you not only need freedom but you need to deeply appreciate some specific direction. In spite of the fact that we all think we'd love to be autonomous, we need the boundaries provided for us by God's Word.

Then there's the grace extended to those who can't keep Passover at the appointed time. God makes a way. He is a way maker.

There's grace in this interaction with Moses. "God, I've got another question for you." "Bring it on, Moses." The one BIG lesson in this passage is the grace of God.

What's beautiful is to put on your Gospel glasses and see this lesson on the grace of God through the clarity of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Last month in *The*

Coronian email, Carl Welch shared a story about a mission trip to Nicaragua where he met a man wearing old, thick, glasses held together by string. Carl exchanged his glasses for a different pair, knowing that wouldn't solve his vision problem. But God did a miracle that day and the man saw with clarity through new glasses.

If you look at the New Testament through the lens of the Old Covenant, it's like looking through old, thick glasses. Sometimes Christians look at a passage like Numbers 9 and say, "See, what matters to God is "rules and regulations" and "the appointed time." We will track whether you take communion on the Sunday we choose and in the way we instruct. It's not real communion if you don't follow the rules.

Instead, we need to look at Numbers through Gospel glasses. We've captured the essence of the Scripture in context – which is what I called a couple of weeks ago "biblical theology." But it's in seed form in Numbers. What does it look like when we view this same passage through Gospel lenses?

First, God knows we need reminders. That's what Passover is, and that's what the Lord's Supper is. This is the connection Jesus himself made between Passover and the Lord's Supper. "Do this in remembrance of me."

This grace of God that gives second chances is even more clearly seen on the cross and through the resurrection. It's so easy for us to default back to performance religion, that God is watching our every move to see if we measure up to his standards. The entire Old Testament, including and especially the book of Numbers, is given to us to remind us of the impossibility of doing that. We need visuals – baptism and the Lord's Supper – as God's revealed reminders that we are saved by grace through faith, and not of ourselves. Even the faith is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Second, God's grace uses power to embrace. I'm going to say some things here that someone is going to think is political or inflammatory. Everything seems to be political or inflammatory these days. My interest from this pulpit is not politics. It's Scripture and it's Gospel.

Among the hot button issues of 2020 is racial justice. I've heard and read very little, even from Christians, that seeks to frame the issues from a grace perspective. Blacks in America have real stories of generational pain and oppression, and many still experience discrimination and prejudice. Many whites, on the other hand, respond that it's not a sin to be white, that some of the responses have been extreme, that it's unfair to blame all law enforcement for the egregious actions of a few.

Let me offer what I believe is the Gospel perspective. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No one is innocent, and no one individual or group is without blame. But here's the point of Numbers 9, seen with Gospel lenses. God's grace doesn't blame or favor people based on their ethnicity or skin color or where they were born. All have the same problem, the same provision, and the same responsibility.

The specific issue that God was dealing with in Numbers 9 is the same issue that exists today. Because of sin, people with power and privilege tend to use their advantage to control and even abuse. The Egyptians did it to the Israelites, and God is telling the Israelites not to do it to the foreigners who live among them.

The issue in most societies and groups is not so much skin color as it is majority or might. All through history, all across the world, people with power have used their power to use other people. The most tragic part of America's story is the use of force to transport slaves from Africa to these shores, and then throughout the generations fight to preserve and extend that race-based power.

In Numbers 9, God is reinforcing a lesson he has given before and will give again. The prophets will tell the Israelites this is a primary reason for God's judgment. When you use the inequality of your position and power to exploit, that's sin, that's evil. The sin is not in having power or privilege or wealth. Power is always distributed unevenly in every human society.

God, the ultimate power, calls us to name the power we have been given over others – and use our power for his good and his purpose. The Gospel question is, "How can I use all God has given me to bless someone else – with money, with possibility, and most of all, with the glorious Gospel of God's grace?" How can I use the power I have to include those with less power in the privileges and responsibilities I have?

Finally, God's grace directs and redirects. I love how Moses answers the people when confronted with a question the previously revealed word of God doesn't easily resolve. There are three steps: Wait, Ask God, and Do.

There are times when God's direction is obvious. There are times when what God has already said is very clear and I don't have to spend time praying about it. You don't have to ask, "God, is it your will that I commit adultery?" At other times the Bible is less clear. Do I join this church, take that job, marry that person? Most of us have faced questions like that during the last six months.

What do we learn about seeking God's will in matters not clear in the Bible? First, wait. If it's possible to delay the decision, waiting is a way of trusting God.

Second, ask God. That doesn't mean we can do what Moses did and have an out loud conversation in the Tent of Meeting. It does mean we read Scripture and pray.

Third, do. Do the best you know to do and trust that God will work in and through it for our good. Sometimes the short term result is not great. But grace will have the last word and turn even our mistakes into his glory.

Every part of our story, like that of the children of Israel in the desert, is ultimately about God and at the end it's a story of what his grace can do. Amen.