

“We Gather Together”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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Gratitude isn't canceled.

Numbers 28:26-29:11

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What you've been up to

I know what you've been up to lately. Other than an inventory of and possibly a desperate renewed search for toilet paper, you've been downsizing, altering, and communicating about your plans for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Everything's going to be at least a little different in 2020. So you've been deciding whether to travel this week, if you usually do. If you usually host, you've been deciding who should and shouldn't be included. As for Christmas, you've been making your lists early this year.

How do I know what you've been doing? I know it for a couple of reasons. First, it's all happening at my house and in my family. Recipes, grocery shopping, emails, Christmas lists, who's coming and who isn't. The other reason I know it's happening elsewhere is because I was accidentally copied on one family's internal communication about their holiday plans. I'll let you worry about whether it was your family or not.

So I know what you've been up to. The question I want to raise is why. This is the right year to ask the why questions. I think one of the questions we all have is whether this pandemic is going to permanently alter those long-cherished traditions.

I think all of us know instinctively that it's OK to alter traditions for a year. You can try your best to be both safe and sensitive, and know that (hopefully!) by this time next year the pandemic will be a non-issue. What I'm suggesting is that when traditions are in flux or even temporarily suspended, that's a great time to ask why we have them in the first place. Numbers chapters 28 & 29 offer a great biblical starting point.

Journey through wilderness

I also think I know what you were thinking while this morning's Scripture was being read. The really holy people were thinking, "This is such a beautiful sacrifice of worship. I just love the Bible reading."

Others were listening with questions.

- Why is there so much detail and repetition?
- Where did they get all these animals and why do they have to die?
- Does God really like smelling meat that much?

Others were completely distracted. You were thinking,

- I like smelling roast turkey and pumpkin pie.
- I wonder if the pastor noticed that I was checking my Amazon list.

It was hard for me to keep focus, honestly. But I enjoy the challenge of explaining why a Scripture passage matters. Let's start with context.

This is the last of our sermon series in the book of Numbers. You should know that if you're listening today and still interested, you're in the minority. We were averaging about 1000 views of our Traditional Worship YouTube in July and August. In November, it's been about 200. The numbers show that Numbers isn't everyone's favorite book of the Bible. Personally, I've loved the journey.

It's a journey through wilderness, a time of uncertainty and scarcity. Numbers has been perfect for a pandemic year overlaid with election season. It's about trusting God when you don't know what's going to happen next. It's about obeying God when it doesn't make any sense. It's about waiting on God when you'd rather rush ahead. It's about life as we know it – especially now – life lived faithfully in the present when it seems like the past or the future would be much more energizing.

As we come to the end of Numbers, we're setting the stage for life in the Promised Land. The Israelites are still camped on the east side of the Jordan River. They know they're headed for the land of milk and honey, and they've even gotten a taste of it – not only its blessings but its temptations. God is going to give them a lot of instructions about everything in their new home – how to divide the land, how to get along with each other, and most importantly, how to keep their focus on God.

Why then?

So why all these festivals and sacrifices in Numbers 28 and 29? Why are they recorded here at the end of Numbers and why do they matter at all? We know they matter because we find various lists of festivals and sacrifices in the books of Exodus and Leviticus – which give God's instructions at the beginning of the wilderness journey and here in Numbers and Deuteronomy, which give God's instructions at the end of the

forty years. Apparently God thought they were important, and so did the Jews who preserved and passed on these writings. For the most part, Jews all over the world today still observe all these festivals and more – just without all the blood.

That begs the question, of course: Why? I think the answer lies in the cumulative and repetitive nature of these sacrifices. What we have here are sacrifices offered by the priests at the tabernacle. Elsewhere we have instructions about individual families doing their own thing at Passover, for example. This is different.

The cumulative part looks like this: daily offerings, weekly offerings, monthly offerings, and annual offerings. The priests were to slaughter and burn two lambs every morning and evening, along with some food and alcoholic beverage. Once a week on the Sabbath, they were to offer those four daily lambs, plus two more with more food and drink. On the first day of the month, they were to present those offerings and add two bulls, a ram, seven lambs, and more food and drink.

And then, in addition to those, there were five annual festivals where they would offer even more animals and food and drink, burning them all up. If the festival landed on the Sabbath, the priests would sacrifice the daily and weekly offerings and add the annual offerings. If it landed on the first day of the month, the priests would offer the daily and monthly sacrifices and add the annual sacrifice.

Today we read about three of the five festivals, because I thought that was all we could handle. Here are the five, with names by which Jews today recognize them:

- *Pesach*: Passover, recalling how God spared Israel's firstborn in Egypt.
- *Shavuot*: Firstfruits, seven weeks later, celebrating the spring wheat harvest.
- *Rosh Hashanah*: Trumpets, calling attention to the seventh month as holy.
- *Yom Kippur*: Atonement, ten days after Trumpets, with offerings for sin.
- *Sukkoth*: Booths, remembering the forty years of living in desert tents.

For my purpose today, the difference among them is not as important as what they have in common. All of these are themes not only in these chapters but throughout the Bible. They review the past and set the stage for everything that follows.

First, offering. You may focus on the animals that were killed, but don't stop there. Over the course of a year the priests were to offer 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1,086 lambs, 25 goats, a ton of flour, and a thousand bottles of oil and wine. They were to burn them all up – completely. Why? Isn't it just a giant waste of valuable food that could care for the poor? That might be true, but even at that number it was only a fraction of what the community possessed together. The point of an offering is exactly that. You give up something valuable – something you want, something you might even need.

Giving a portion of that back to God without getting anything back for yourself is what an "offering" is. In truth, you not only received everything you have from God;

you gain a great deal when you recognize he is the provider. Every day, once a week on the seventh day, every first day of the month, and five times a year you honor God's provision by giving up your right to something costly. The Day of Atonement even explicitly adds "You must deny yourselves" (or "fast").

This is a New Testament theme as well. The essence of the Christian life, Paul says, is to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices" (Romans 12:1) in response to the mercies of God. It's crazy talk, when you think about it. And, of course, it's not literal. You don't commit physical suicide. You commit volitional suicide. You kill your rights to your stuff and your time, to having your own way, to having the world revolve around you. Jesus says when you lose your life for his sake, you gain true life.

Second, atonement. Some of these animal sacrifices, not all of them, are specifically designated as a "sin offering" or for the purpose of "atonement." This is supposed to be dramatic. It would have been dramatic at the tabernacle, until it became routine. I would think after watching a few of these slaughters and smelling burned flesh day after day, people would get used to it. I don't think they were ever supposed to get used to it. Sin leads to death. Sin costs. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness, Leviticus says.

This is another one of the parts of the Bible for which I have zero interest in making or watching video. Imagining it is enough. Some years ago one of my professors was a guest speaker here. He had been to Israel and participated in slaughtering a lamb. One lamb! He showed a picture of a lamb lying still with blood coming from its neck, and I got some negative feedback. That doesn't belong in worship.

Well, I get it. I don't much like seeing it either. I'm not fond of blood. But the point of the visual is to connect this sacrifice to the ultimate sacrifice. We are to look on the cross of Jesus with gratitude and humility and faith. The cross was necessary so that these animal sacrifices would become unnecessary. The writer of Hebrews expounds this theme more than any other. Jesus' blood is gory too, but because of his final and complete sacrifice our sins can be forgiven. Thanks be to God!

Third, assembly. All of the annual festivals described in Numbers 28-29 instruct the people to gather together in a "sacred assembly." This too is a theme throughout the Bible. Faith is never a solo venture. These would have been very large gatherings of throngs to watch and pray and just be together.

"Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together," the writer of Hebrews says. Jesus named the organization he would found the "church," which literally means "assembly." He wanted his followers together for encouragement, teaching, discipline, and worship. We need each other.

Fourth, peculiarity. "Do no regular work," the people are told for all of their annual festivals, and it's assumed that's what the Sabbath is all about once a week. Part

of the sinful human nature is to work, work, work, work, work all the time – for more money, for more recognition, for more control over people and circumstances and even God. God establishes the Sabbath principle in the second chapter of Genesis, and it carries throughout the Old Testament.

Keeping the Sabbath does not get anywhere near as much emphasis in the New Testament. The seventh day was intended to be an identity mark setting Jewish people apart from everyone else. It's about being different. Instead, over the centuries for many Jews it had become about the details – precisely what was allowed and what wasn't. They did a lot of arguing about that, and still do. So have and do Christians.

In Romans 14 Paul says to follow your conscience in matters of Sabbath and festivals. He doesn't think God is all that concerned about whether believers in Jesus do or do not keep the calendar or all the specific rules. If it draws you closer to God, great. If not, fine. Don't judge everyone else's relationship to God based on these matters.

But the thread through both testaments is to be different. This is important precisely because in some ways you're always going to look like the world. The sacrifices to the gods prescribed in these chapters might not have looked all that unique to Balaam and Balak and the Moabites and Midianites or Egyptians, for that matter. But this stopping to rest and in this way trusting God – that was strange. Not trying to force God's hand or dominate everyone around you – that was odd. Letting go of your need to produce or gather – even essentials – every single day, that was peculiar. It still is.

Fifth, worship. All of these sacrifices were “an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” We understand this as anthropomorphic language, which means “in human form.” It's a way of helping us understand God with analogies to us. It has nothing to do with God's having literal olfactory glands, sitting up in heaven thinking, “Oh I love the smell of steak.” If that's how you think of it, God definitely likes it well done – to a crisp, to ash.

No, this is our way of understanding that the purpose of all of this is to please him. And he takes delight when we recognize our sin and come to him, when we offer ourselves to him, when we gather together, when we live a set apart life. He loves it!

The entire Bible crescendos into worship around the throne of God and of the Lamb. “Holy, holy, holy!” the elders and angels and saints cry out. We're just getting started with worship here in the wilderness, but it's what we were made for.

Why now

All this brings us back to why we celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas. This may be a year to let go of some traditions and claim some new ones. It will feel like a time of loss, but it might result in great gain if we ask, “Why?” Take some time to think through, write down, and talk about why we have these celebrations in the first place

To relinquish control. The Israelites were letting go of their regular work, of their personal space, to come together and let go of some of their common property. We too need regular reminders that we can't control people and schedules and stuff.

2020 is the best opportunity you and I have ever had to pray the Serenity Prayer over every gathering – “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

To recall the beginnings. All of these Jewish festivals pointed backward to what God had done – especially Passover and the Feast of Booths. Jewish people were to remember their origin as a people – to remember the stories of Exodus and Numbers. They wouldn't be a people if God hadn't preserved and directed their beginning.

Thanksgiving and Christmas are stories of “beginnings.” Maybe that's a way to steer the conversations away from whatever is dividing people right now. If it's been a while since you shared the story of the first Thanksgiving, spend some time on that this week. Make sure in your Christmas celebrations you're focused in some way on retelling why we give gifts, string lights, put up trees, and sing carols.

When you look up the history of these traditions, you may be surprised to find pagan origins intertwined. Don't be afraid or defensive of that part of the story. Israel's annual festivals were also similar at first glance to pagan feasts and sacrifices. We can baptize almost anything and turn it into a God-thing. We're in the world but not of it.

To remember the Giver. Alice Spuller sent me a Winnie the Pooh meme yesterday. Sometimes those emails come at just the right moment. Thank you, Alice! There's so much that's different this year, so much that we feel is “canceled” – but not love, relationships, kindness, not even naps! (That's my favorite.)

This year remember that gratitude isn't canceled. Every Jewish festival is about God – who he is, what he's like, and especially what he's done to preserve his people. Even festivals added later on in Israel's history – like Purim and Hanukkah – have the same theme. Our first tour guide in Israel stood outside the Holocaust memorial and told us that the essence of every Jewish festival is, “They tried to kill us, they didn't kill us, let's eat.” Even after war or disaster, there's a reason for gratitude.

This is the year to remember with thanks that even with all the losses you might have experienced, the griefs you are bearing, the frustrations and divisions, life isn't canceled. You still have breath. You still have people. You still have a home. You still have food. You still have hope. And most importantly, you still have the grace of God poured out through Jesus Christ. You still have salvation.

Every celebration these next few weeks recalls the words of James: “Every good and perfect gift comes from the Heavenly Father.” Remember the Giver. Amen.