

February 5

Numbers 9:1-12 and 1 and 2

Today you read from Numbers 9 and Numbers 1 and 2. It has been one full year now since the Exodus and the passage we read today records for us the celebration of the first Passover in the wilderness. Now I know that you remember all about this feast so I will not tell you again the whole story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt all over again. This would, of course, have been a very special Passover for the Jews. It was the first time that they celebrated it as a memorial to the mighty deliverance God had wrought for them in the land of Egypt.

It began on the 14th day of the first month (that would normally correspond to April for us) and it lasted for eight days, and the word came from the Lord that they were to celebrate it "*in accordance with all its rules and regulations.*" I'm sure that word would have been the cause for at least a little bit of consternation, because out there in the middle of the wilderness it would be a bit of a challenge to meet with all the stipulations God had given back in Exodus - how, for example, would you sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the doorposts if you were living in a tent? I suppose it was the tent flaps that got sprinkled.

I want to point out to you the importance of that phrase, "*The Lord spoke to Moses.*" It's there in verse 1 of chapter 9, and in verse 5 we're told, "*The Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses.*" That was the basis of his authority. Everyone knew and understood that God was talking to Moses. God was giving the directions. When the question arose concerning the individuals who were ceremonially unclean because they had come into contact with a dead body, they brought their question to Moses and he took it to the Lord, and (verse 9,) "*The Lord said to Moses*" – 'they can still celebrate - they do not have to miss Passover, but let them celebrate in the second month instead of the first.' Here is what I want for us to see. A question arose - direction was needed. They sought the Lord for that direction and He gave it. Surely there is a lesson here for us. I do not want to oversimplify nor do I wish to be guilty of unduly spiritualizing things, but friends, so much of the time when we are confronted with new situations, or when there is a dilemma for which we have no easy answer, we do everything else but ask the Lord. We do feasibility studies, we form committees, we have think-tank sessions, we talk and we seek consensus. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with any of that. In many counselors, the Book of Proverbs reminds us, there is wisdom to be found, but far too often when we have done all of those things, we take our best shot and go with it, without ever having spent any real time or effort on the thing that we should have done first - and that is prayer! There was a problem in Israel. For Moses, the most natural thing in the world was to go to the Tent of Meeting and pray about it.

Are you facing a challenging dilemma? How much have you invested in prayer? How does that compare to the time you have spent consulting with others? Maybe it is time to just seek him.

Moving on to chapters 1 and 2 we again see the simple assertion in the very first verse that 'the Lord spoke to Moses and then Moses spoke to the people.' That is what a

'prophet' was all about. God spoke to the prophet, and the prophet carried those words to the people. More than 150 times between verse 1 of chapter 1 and the closing verse of chapter 36, we will be told that the Lord spoke to Moses. So prominent is this phrase, that there is another Hebrew title for this book, which could be translated simply, "And He Spoke." Two thoughts emerge from this observation. The first is that being a 'prophet' just meant hearing from God and telling the people what you heard. We still want to associate that word 'prophet' with telling the future and sometimes that is what a prophet did, but mostly it just meant telling people what God was saying. The second thing, and perhaps the more important thing, is that Moses' authority with the people of Israel was directly linked to their understanding that what he told them came directly to him from God in the Tent of Meeting.

Now then, let us turn attention to what you read. The census was conducted and the number of men 20 years of age and older were counted. There were 603,550 men of fighting age. (By the way, of those, 603,548, that is, all but two, would perish in the wilderness because of unbelief.) That number has created a certain amount of controversy because many scholars simply do not believe that the desert, even with the supernatural intervention of God, could support that kind of population. One Bible teacher (Harold Wilmington) expresses the problem this way: "If taken literally, (this census figure) would strongly suggest a total Israelite population of more than two million. The problem, therefore, arises concerning the care and feeding of this multitude for nearly 40 years, much of it spent in a desolate and arid desert. For example, it has been estimated that it would require nearly 50 railway boxcars of manna per day just to feed all the people. That would not take into account the physical needs of the thousands of animals that accompanied them. The water needs would likewise be immense: some 12 million gallons per day. In fact, the ground area needed to accommodate this multitude when they camped at night would exceed 100 square miles.

There is no way to deny that the plain reading of Exodus and Numbers creates an enormous problem in terms of the sheer number of people involved. The only way that these figures could possibly be true would be if God supernaturally and miraculously prospered and sustained this nation - and of course, that is exactly what the Scripture says that He did.

Before I make a few quick comments about the arrangement of the camp, I want to just note in passing that the twelve numbered tribes were Reuben, Simeon, Gad, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher and Naphtali. Twelve tribes, with Ephraim and Manasseh, the two sons of Joseph, listed as separate tribes. Notice that Levi is not counted in the census - primarily because they were set aside for God's service and could never be considered fighting men. Since Joseph gets two tribes and Levi gets none, we still have the 12 tribes of Israel for all pragmatic purposes.

I'm sure that in chapter 2 you did not miss the fact that during their journeys the Israelites always camped so that the Tabernacle of God was in the middle of the camp. Everything focused upon it. Judah led the three tribes camped on the East; Dan led the tribes on the north; Ephraim the tribes on the West; and Reuben the tribes on the South. It will not take much thinking to recognize the symbolic importance of the camping

arrangements. God's house in the center of the camp speaks of God in the center of the life of Israel as a nation and as individuals - and of course what was true for them must also be true for us - God needs to be in the center!

This is Mark Ashton praying for each of you that you will live with God at the center and count yourself among those who fight for him. God bless you!