

Privilege, Pride and Provision

Are you aware of how easy it is for “something to get lost in translation”? Lee Strobel did an experiment with one of the Internet translation software programs. He took the words to the song, “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” and translated them into German and then from German, back into English to see if anything might get lost in the translation. Here’s the results:

Execute me to the ball play. Execute me with the masses. Buy me certain groundnuts and crackerstackfusig. I’m not interested if I never receive back. Let me root, root, root for the main team. If they do not win, it is dishonor. For there are one, two, three impacts on you at the old ball play. ⁱ

I guess computers aren’t ready to take over the world quite yet. What does this have to do with Numbers? It’s not that it’s difficult to translate ancient Hebrew into modern English. Actually, biblical Hebrew is closer to modern Hebrew than Shakespearean English is to modern English. So, it’s not the actual language that’s hard to translate, it’s the meaning that is difficult for us.

Languages are never disconnected from cultures. So, to understand a language fully, you need to have some understanding of the culture. In applying that truth to the Bible, do you see the challenge? We’re talking about at least three cultures – Jewish culture, Greek culture (because the New Testament is written in Greek) and our modern culture. In today’s Scripture, there are incredibly deep and thrilling truths buried in the dust of these ancient texts. The psalmist wrote:

Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. (Ps. 119:18)

So, today we need to pray that prayer. First, with opened eyes we’ll see:

I. A Great Privilege.

As we’ve said before, God is painting a picture for us here in Numbers. The Old Testament is not “God’s First Try,” where He tried to make a way for people to be made right with Him, but it didn’t work, so He had to send His Son to try a different way. No, God knew from the beginning that humans would fail at trying to obey Him and that only His Son’s sacrifice on the cross could pay for our sin. So, the animal sacrifices, the “sin” offerings, the Day of Atonement... all these O.T. things were “pictures,” “dramas” that acted out what Christ would do when He came. There’s not an Old Testament way and a New Testament way for sins to be forgiven. There’s only one way - we have a One-Way God! The Old Testament points us to that way, the New Testament “fulfills” the drama we see acted out in the Old Testament.

In Numbers 18 God shows Aaron the role priests and Levites play in this drama. All priests and Levites had to be, like Moses and Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. All priests had to be direct descendants of Aaron. The Levites were descendants of other members of the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi was treated completely differently from any other tribe. While all the other tribes got an assignment of land (like our States), the Levites weren’t assigned any land but were scattered among 48 cities in the other tribes. So, without land, how were the Levites

supposed to grow crops and raise cattle in order to live? They lived off the tithes of crops and cattle that the other tribes brought to the Tabernacle. (Num. 18:8)

Then the LORD said to Aaron: "I myself have put you in charge of the offerings presented to me; all the holy offerings... I give to you and your sons as your portion and regular share."

So, the Levites didn't own any land, but they received sustenance from the land. But with this privilege came a great responsibility. The LORD said:

...You, your sons and your father's family are to bear the responsibility for offenses against the sanctuary... You are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar, so that wrath will not fall on the Israelites again. (Num. 18:1, 5)

What does this mean? God's not just talking about making sure the Tabernacle was clean and functioning well. Yes, only the priests and Levites could offer the sacrifices for sin, but God's saying more than that. God's talking about taking responsibility for the spiritual health of the entire nation. Why did God choose the tribe of Levi for this huge responsibility? Exodus tells us it is because of the role the Levites played during the incident of the Golden Calf. Remember that little incident? Moses was up on the mountain getting the Ten Commandments and what was happening down in the camp? The people, with Aaron's help, were worshipping an idol and having an orgy. It was members of the tribe of Levi, under Moses' direction, that put a stop to it. (Ex. 32:26-29) So, Num. 18 describes the Levites' great privilege and their even greater responsibility.

And what, if anything does this have to do with us? Well, if we are Christians, it has EVERYTHING to do with us because the book of Hebrews tells us that Christ is our High Priest and I Peter says that we are the new priesthood:

Heb. 7:21-22 **...but he (Jesus) became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'" Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.**

I Peter 2:5 **...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.**

If you are a Christian, you are a priest. As a priest you have an awesome responsibility to pray and work and witness to the people of this nation "so that the wrath of God will not fall." Are you taking your responsibility seriously?

And you also have a great privilege. Commentator, Ronald Allen, writes: **Today believers have no land promise but enjoy a special relationship with the Lord. There is a sense in which we enjoy what the high priest in Israel had, along with all priests... a peculiar relationship with the Lord.** ⁱⁱ

Do you see it? Do you see your great privilege and responsibility?

Throughout Israel's history, their success as a culture would rise and fall depending on their spiritual health and their spiritual health depended on whether or not the priesthood was doing its job. Why would this not be true today? Every Christian is a priest. We are responsible to pray, to tell our culture the truth and then invite them to receive the mercy and grace of God. We believe God has called us to announce His mercy and grace to the NW corner of CT. Will you join us?

Now, in chapter 20 we come to Moses and Aaron's personal battle with...

II. The Disease of Pride.

We'll come back to chapter 19 in a moment, but I want us first to examine chapter 20. This is the classic story of Moses striking a rock to get water for the thirsty people. To be clear, this is now 40 years later. The desert experience is all but over. This is happening back at Kadesh Barnea but this is the Next Generation, not the First. But do you notice that the complaints are almost identical. The First Generation complained at Kadesh: (Num. 14:3)

"Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?... Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?"

The Next Generation, 40 years later complained: (Num. 20:4, 5)

Why did you bring the LORD's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place?

Some commentaries call Moses' act, "the ultimate rebellion." But what exactly did he do that was so terrible? Didn't he just lose his temper and hit the rock rather than speak to it, as the Lord told him to do? By the penalty that God hands down, it clearly is a major, major offense. Moses is banned from entering the Land of Promise and Aaron dies within a month. Why is this so serious?

We need, at this point, to remember what we've been saying is the purpose of this whole story of life in the desert and even the larger story of the Exodus. God is revealing symbols of eternal principles that will find fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Being rescued from Egypt isn't just a story of political freedom, it's a symbolic story of spiritual freedom. Worshipping God through very specific sacrifices, that required the death and blood of innocent animals wasn't about animal cruelty it was symbolizing how sin would have to be paid for by the death and blood of the innocent Son of God. And now, in like manner, getting water from a rock wasn't just about quenching physical thirst in an earthly desert. It was symbolizing getting spiritual water for quenching spiritual thirst in a spiritual desert. In I Cor. 10, the apostle Paul interprets Numbers 20 for us:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (I Cor. 10:1-4)

Okay? Do you see why Moses' mistake was so huge? Moses and Aaron smudged the picture God was painting! God had Moses strike a rock 40 years earlier at Rephidim (Ex. 17), and water flowed out. But getting water from a rock is symbolic of getting spiritual water from Christ. Christ will be struck but only once! Christ will be struck at the cross, but NEVER AGAIN!

But Moses, in anger, takes his rod – the rod that God had used to produce miracles for the people – and he says: (Num. 20:10)

...Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?

And he struck the rock in anger, not once but twice. He struck the rock in anger, in judgment, but he's also changing the painting that God wanted to paint.

Because of this disobedience on Moses and Aaron's part, God can't use this symbol the way he wanted to use it. Christ, the rock from which spiritual water flows, will only be struck once. For all the good that Moses and Aaron did, they spoiled this part of God's message to future generations and so there had to be a consequence. Neither Moses nor Aaron would enter the Land of Promise. Both died on the far side of the Jordan. God said to Moses and Aaron:

Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them. (Num. 20:12)

What caused Moses and Aaron to have this spiritual lapse? Moses tried to blame it on the people. But that obviously couldn't be true because this is the seventh time the people had complained in the same way and Moses and Aaron responded well the first six times. So, what was it? It was the same sin which we all are so susceptible to – pride, arrogance, putting my will before God's will. Even the greatest of leaders is capable of this sin. And while this is sad, some might even say unfair after all that Moses had weathered with these people, it also reveals a critically important principle: even the greatest and most mature people need to be cleansed of sin. This leads us back to Numbers, chapter 19 and the story and symbol of the red heifer. This Old Testament story reveals...

III. The Provision for Wrath.

If you ask most people what they think is the biggest difference between how God is portrayed in the Old and New Testaments, most will say, "God seems angrier in the Old Testament than in the New." I think this is an accurate statement. There are, in fact, five times as many references to God's wrath in the Old Testament as there are in the New even though there are only three times as many verses.

But not all of those references to wrath in the Old Testament are warnings of judgment. A significant portion are talking about how God's wrath can be averted. Numbers 19 is one such passage. Here we find a unique practice, an animal sacrifice, for a specific application. This ritual is to provide cleansing for what might be called "sins on the way." What does that mean? Well, while the Israelites were moving from place to place, they had to have a means by which they could deal with their sins because the Tabernacle was moving with them. They couldn't stop and set up the Tabernacle every time somebody sinned! So, God gave them this process for producing a spiritual 'cleansing solution,' kind of a "sin spot remover." But look at how different this sacrifice is from every other sacrifice for sin.

Tabernacle Sacrifices

1. Performed IN the Tabernacle
2. Animal – spotless male
3. Slain by a priest
4. Blood poured out before the Lord
5. Nothing done with ashes

Red Heifer Sacrifice

1. Performed OUTSIDE the camp
2. Animal – spotless female
3. Slain by a non-priest
4. Blood burned with carcass
5. Ashes mixed with water for purification from sin

Before we unlock this mystery, we need to go back and ask, "Why is God so much more angry in the Old Testament than in the New?" Well, what is He angry about? Here's something we need to understand about God's wrath – His wrath is always good. Some of you are thinking, "Isn't that an oxymoron? How can wrath be good..."

EVER?" Well, is it good to be angry about what happened at the Sandyhook Elementary School? Is it good to be angry at politicians who lie to keep their positions of power? Is it good to be angry at people who trick the elderly into giving them their life savings to invest and then run off to Bermuda and spend it on themselves? I think we can agree that wrath is a good thing when dealing with evil.

When God sees evil, His natural reaction is to get angry. For God to be angry is as natural and as good as when He is loving. In fact, His wrath is strongly connected to His love. Without God's wrath there would never, ever be justice in this world. It is God's wrath that will one day destroy all evil. It is God's wrath that will complete the work of God's love. Think of it this way: remember those three girls who were kidnapped and held in slavery by that man in Cleveland? What if those women were freed but the man was not arrested? Wouldn't that be love without wrath? God's wrath completes the work of God's love by providing justice.

So, why is there so much more wrath of God in the Old Testament than in the New? It's because the red heifer had not yet come. The red heifer ritual of the Old Testament is the drama, the symbolizing of what Christ does in the New Testament. The biblical word for it is "propitiation." That word literally means, "the turning away of wrath by an offering." Heb. 2:17 describes it:

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

The red heifer ritual symbolizes God's wrath being turned away from us, BUT still performing perfect justice so that your sin and my sin could be "paid for" by Christ. Look at how the red heifer ritual is an exact description of Christ's death:

1. Performed outside the camp – Christ was crucified outside the city.
2. A spotless female – Females are the ones through whom "new life" is born. We are born again, a distinctly female symbol, through Christ's death.
3. Slain by a non-priest – Jesus was killed by the Romans.
4. Blood burned (offered up) with the carcass – Christ did not bleed to death but was dead before He was speared in the side.
5. Ashes used for purification for "sins on the way" - We celebrate Christ's body and blood symbolically for our purification for our 'sins on the way' as we journey to heaven.

The Old Testament is not only full of the wrath of God, it is also full of the provision that God has made for us, so that His wrath can be turned away. When our eyes are opened by God, we see what He always intended us to see – the Old Testament is full of Jesus, the only one who can turn God's righteous wrath from us! Have you been purified by the only solution that can remove the guilt of your sin – having the ashes of the real "red heifer" sprinkled on your soul? Let's pray...

ⁱ Lee Strobel, “Meet the Jesus I Know,” (Preaching Today Audio No. 211)

ⁱⁱ Ronald B. Allen, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 2*(Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), p. 855