

Series: Desert Road, Land of Promise, #9
Valley Community Baptist Church
Avon, CT

Text: Num. 27:12-18; Josh. 1:1-9
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A New Beginning

John Stott was a very influential pastor in England who wrote a book entitled, "Basic Christianity" that was used by God to explain the Gospel to millions of people. After this book had been out for decades, Stott revised it. Shortly after the revised edition had come out, he received this letter from an old friend:

Dear John,
Thank you for writing "Basic Christianity." It led me to make a new commitment of my life to Christ. I am old now – nearly 78 – but not too old to make a new beginning. I rejoice in all the grand work you are doing.
Yours sincerely,
Leslie Weatherhead

In his day, Rev. Weatherhead was one of the most influential Christian leaders in the United Kingdom. Thousands heard him preach at City Temple, his books were read widely, he pioneered in the field of pastoral counseling, and was a past president of the Methodist Conference. Yet at 78 years old he was not too old or too worn out to make a fresh commitment, a new beginning with Christ. ⁱ

Today I'm calling on all of us to make that kind of a new beginning. We're jumping ahead in Numbers to chapter 27. I'm doing this because I think what this Next Generation of Israel does is so applicable for us, as we consider the "new beginning" that God is laying before us here at Valley. I believe God is calling us in our 37th year, as he was calling Rev. Weatherhead in his 78th year – not to start over, but rather to deepen our commitment. Next week at our Annual Meeting, we'll decide whether or not to make that commitment corporately.

So, this week, I want us to see the purpose, the plan and the provision for Valley's new vision. First, as was true for Israel, ours is...

I. An Old Purpose

In Num. 27, God is speaking to Moses just before the Israelites move into the Land of Promise. God says:

...“Go up this mountain in the Abarim range and see the land I have given the Israelites.” (Num. 27:12)

This is an old, old purpose for the nation of Israel. 685 years earlier, God called Abram to leave the country of his birth and move to Canaan. When he got there, God said to him:

To your offspring I will give this land. (Gen. 12:7)

685 years!! Wow! That's a long, long time. And God had repeated this promise to Abraham's descendants – Isaac and Jacob and now Moses. But the purpose wasn't just about the land. No, there was a reason WHY God was giving them this land. God had given Abram that purpose the very same day He called him to leave his country. God said:

**I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
And you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2, 3)**

The land was just a platform actually, a “launching pad” for God’s greater purpose. Their purpose was to be the courier of a blessing from God to all people on earth.

How would you feel if God gave you a purpose like that? The worst jobs in the world have to be those jobs where you are the one to tell people really bad news. For instance, how would you like to be the person at the bank who tells people their house is being foreclosed on? Or how would you like to be the doctor who has to tell someone he has some disease for which there is no known cure? Those are very high stress jobs!

But, on the other hand, how would you like to be the person who tells people they just won the Publishers Clearinghouse first prize? Or be the doctor who tells a patient that he can’t find a trace of cancer in his system anymore?

You know what? That’s like our purpose here as a church! Our purpose is not to give people bad news. Our purpose is to give people the incredibly good news that God wants to bless them with His grace and mercy. We’ve been given the same purpose as the Israelites – to let people know that God wants to bless them. We’ve understood that purpose from our very beginning. In Valley’s first constitution, there is a five-part purpose statement. The third part says our purpose is:

To obey Christ’s great commission through the preaching of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in order to lead people to a personal commitment of themselves to Him as Savior and Lord.

The word “gospel” literally means, “Good News!” So, along with worshipping God, growing spiritually and caring for the needs of others, sharing the Good News with people who don’t know it is our great privilege and purpose. We’ve worded these four values differently over the 37 years of our existence, but from the very beginning until today, they’ve all been there. As we discussed last fall, our most recent wording is this: eight words, two words for each of the four purposes:

<u>Value</u>	<u>Words</u>
Sharing Good News	Sharing, Reaching
Growing Spiritually	Knowing, Growing
Caring for needs	Caring, Serving
Worshipping	Praying, Worshipping

Now, how did we come up with these eight words? Well, about four years ago, we assigned a team the task of prayerfully considering what God was specifically calling us to be and do as a church ten years from now. Part of that process was to ask all of you that same question. And the number one response, the most often stated response from you was, “We need to find ways to share the gospel with more people.” Now we (“we” being our staff and elected leaders who work with the staff), “we” have been working to take action on this priority which is built solidly on our purpose; a purpose, by the way that isn’t a mere 685 years old, but 2,000 years old, since it comes directly from Jesus Christ! This is our purpose – like

Israel, it is our great privilege to share with people the fact that God wants to bless them with His grace and mercy. But this old purpose must lead to...

II. Our New Plan

Israel had a 685-year-old purpose but this Next Generation of Israelites was about to implement a brand, spanking new plan. This is a plan they had never lived by before. Abraham didn't do it, nor did Isaac or Jacob or Joseph. Each of those generations had successfully followed the plan God had revealed for them. And each of those plans was quite different – Abraham's plan involved a lot of travel. Isaac was pretty much a "home-body," Jacob became wealthy working for his uncle and then moved the whole family to Egypt, where Joseph was a very, very successful politician. Each generation followed a plan from God and they were successful plans, but very, very different. Now, this Next Generation of Israel is given another radically different plan. We see it laid out for them by God Who tells Joshua:

...Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

(Josh. 1:2, 5)

I want us to see that there were three components of this New Plan from God. First, it was an Expansion Plan. The Israelites were expanding their influence into places none of them had ever been to before. It was a massive border crossing, like we saw with the apostle Paul last fall. I'm sure that some of them were frightened but God said to them THREE TIMES, "Be strong and courageous..." And the third time God added, "Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." Aren't those the exact same words Jesus gave to us just before He went back to heaven? I think they are!

Secondly, this new plan for Israel was a Word-Centered Plan. God told them: **Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.** (Josh. 1:8)

Their success did not depend on their own cleverness or their extreme effort. It depended on one thing – their faith in the Word of God. God sometimes gave the Israelites illogical methods, such as, defeating a city by marching around it and blowing trumpets. Can you imagine what the people in Jericho thought about them while they were doing this? It didn't matter what they thought. It only mattered what the Israelites did – they trusted God and when they trusted God's Word, walls came tumbling down. This new plan was a Word-Centered Plan.

Lastly, this new plan for Israel was a Relational Plan. First and foremost was their relationship with God. God tells them over and over again, "I will never leave you nor forsake you... for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go." Their first relational obligation was with God. Secondly, this plan demanded a strong relationship with one another, with their brother and sister Israelites. The tribes that were assigned land on the east side of the Jordan were to go over and help the tribes on the west side of the Jordan until that land was secured. This wasn't just a nice idea, this was a demand of the plan. And they all agreed to it.

And finally, this was a plan to bless people. Now, for Israel, this plan involved waging war against human armies, but ultimately it was a plan to bless all people as God had promised Abraham because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, would eventually come through their culture that was going to be established in this new land.

So, how does this translate to us? It translates perfectly. First, God is calling us to an Expansion Plan that we are calling “The Grace and Mercy Movement.” As our Sharing Destination Goal states, we believe God wants:

Every person living in Hartford and Litchfield Counties [to] be reached relationally with the grace and mercy of God.

Our primary method will be to establish ‘outposts’ of ministry throughout these counties. We will move from being a single site church to being a multi-site church; one church doing ministry in multiple locations. This is new! We’ve never done this before. What will this mean? Here are some key elements of this plan:

- This Avon campus will continue with all the same ministries as before, expanding them as space permits.
- Each new campus will contain all the essential elements of ministry that the Avon campus has. So, worship, spiritual growth, caring and outreach will all be available through each site. Size and form may be slightly different but our DNA of ministry will exist at each site.
- Worship will be “live” except for the sermon which will be recorded at Avon and played at each site.
- Each new campus will have its own full-time campus pastor and other necessary staff to guarantee a very friendly, personal touch.
- All campuses will share “centralized administrative services,” to reduce costs and ensure “best practices.”

Now you might be thinking, “Wait, we’ve planted two independent churches. Why aren’t we doing more of that?” Yes, that’s true and both of our church plants are succeeding well. But, here’s why we’re proposing Multi-Site now:

- Multi-Site expansion leverages our expertise and experience. With a church plant people go off and have to create brand new ministries. With Multi-Site we have one Children’s Ministry, one Youth Ministry, one Family Ministry, all happening in many locations. We’re more efficiently leveraging the expertise of our staff, expanding it in several locations.
- While worship is “live” and hosted by the campus pastor, the sermon is recorded in one location to ensure a Word-centered ministry at all sites.
- Multi-Site is easily duplicated. It takes the church to the people rather than forcing them to drive long distances. It puts the “local” back in the local church. It’s building strongly on a Relational Plan.

There’s more I could add, but that gives you the basics. So, let me just say this: I really do believe that this is God’s plan for us at this moment of our history. This is not my idea, I did not think it up. This is a movement of God which He is using literally around the world to expand His kingdom. We’re joining Him where He is working. In the U.S., more people attend a multi-site church each week than attend a mega-church. Multi-sites are not dependent on spending tens of millions of dollars on bricks and mortar. They can meet anywhere – a school, a vacant strip mall, an abandoned warehouse. The focus is not on architecture but on people and that’s the

strong burden God has laid on my heart. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that there are 1,084,789 people in Hartford and Litchfield Counties.ⁱⁱ George Barna, a Christian pollster, says that evangelical Christians make up only 2 – 3% of Connecticut’s population. If we apply that to Hartford and Litchfield counties, that means, at most, there are 32,544 Christians. Those are not the people we’re targeting to attend a multi-site campus of Valley. We’re going after the 1,052,245 non-Christians. That’s our target audience. So, how could we possibly accomplish this? Well, if we look once more at God’s plan for Israel, we’ll see their and...

III. Our Faithful Provision

So, in Joshua 1, the Next Generation of Israel is preparing to do their part to bring God’s blessing to their world. They’re going to fight a war and then build a country. That’s not gonna come cheap! How are they gonna pay for this? God tells them how: (Josh. 1:8)

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night... Then you will be prosperous and successful.

In Numbers 28-30, as part of Moses’ farewell address to the people, what does he do? He walks them through their new rhythm of life. This Next Generation of Israel is the first generation to grow up with what would be for 1500 years the Jewish calendar, their rhythm of life. Moses reminded them of the daily offerings, the weekly Sabbath, the annual feasts at the Temple. And what is the hub of all of this? The hub is worship, worship and prayer. That’s the source of their provision.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we find the full transcript of this farewell address. In it, Moses even accurately prophesies that, though this generation will have great success, a later generation will experience great failure, failure so deep and devastating that the nation will collapse. And it is then that Moses speaks these remarkable words of hope: (Deut. 4:29-31)

But if from there you seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you look for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have happened to you, then in later days you will return to the LORD your God and obey him. For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you...

“But if from there you seek the LORD...” If from where? From their place of rebellion and rejection of God. Do you know anyone who lives there?

In the 1740’s and again in the early 1800’s, people right here in CT, began seriously looking for God. These were labeled the First and Second Great Awakenings. In both cases between 10 and 20% of the population found Him, or more accurately were found BY Him. Twenty percent!! Today in our whole state that would be over 700,000 people! Would you like to see God do that? What do we need to do to make that happen? We need to begin by focusing on the hub, the center of our rhythm of life, which must be worship and prayer. If we want to be successful, we need to depend completely on God for direction and provision. I challenge you today to join me by committing to establish a new rhythm of prayer in your life – it could be monthly, weekly or daily. Heb. 4:16 will be our promise:

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Take one of the Movement Prayer Cards in front of you, fill it out, drop it in the basket and today, June 1(2), let's launch the Grace and Mercy Movement, bringing the Gospel to Connecticut! Let's pray...

ⁱ Adapted from Roger Steer, *Basic Christian* (Naperville: IVP Books, 2010), p. 153

ⁱⁱ U. S. Census Bureau estimates