

# **In the Wilderness: The Gospel According to the Nazirite**

*Scripture Readings: Numbers 6:1-21; 1 John 2:15-17*

*Text: Numbers 6:1-21*

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## **Introduction**

Once upon a time, early fifth century A. D. to be exact, there lived a devout Christian monk in Syria whose name was Simeon. In those days, there were men who withdrew themselves from the world and lived alone in the wilderness. They thought that by doing so, they would be able to devote themselves to God more fully.

Simeon first lived in a hole, buried up to his neck, for several months. He then thought of a better way to serve God: by living on a platform on top of a 50-foot pole! From there, he dispensed counsel and prayers for those who sought his help in seeking God's blessings. This is why he was called "Simeon the Stylite," after the Greek word for pillar, column or pole.

This pole-sitter was one of the early ascetics, later known as monks. They wanted to serve God more earnestly by making vows of separation, poverty, celibacy and good works. Later, they started living in communities of Christian devotees, who later built monasteries where they spent their lives in prayer, Bible reading, and doing good works.

Today, Christians have similar ideas of pietism. We often hear of people who would go to a "prayer mountain" thinking that their prayer would be more earnest – maybe even more effective – if they prayed in a house of prayer. Christians dream of going on a pilgrimage to the "Holy Land," again thinking that they would receive more blessings and their prayers more effective in places where Jesus walked.

We also often associate Simeon and other ascetics and monks with Biblical characters such as Samuel, Elijah and John the Baptist, who wandered and preached in the wilderness. Samuel and John the Baptist were Nazirites, Jews who took special vows of dedication to God.

But that is where the similarities end, because the Nazirites were not ascetics or hermits. Nazirites could not drink wine or eat grapes, but they could eat and drink whatever else they want. They were not to cut their hair, but they could live a lifestyle like the rest of the people. Lastly, the Nazirite vow is usually a temporary dedication of one's life for total service to God.

For what purpose, then, did the Nazirites serve in Israel? How are they useful to Christians today? This afternoon, our theme will point out the significance of the Nazirites to Israel then and to Christians today: **IN THE WILDERNESS: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE NAZIRITE:**

- 1. The Nazirite as Mirror to Israel**
- 2. Salvation by the Anti-Nazirite**
- 3. The Transformed Nazirite Life**

## **The Nazirite as Mirror to Israel**

Numbers 6:1-21 deal with the requirements in being a Nazirite. Verses 1-6 defines who a Nazirite is; verses 7-12 details the Nazirite's vow to avoid uncleanness; and verses 13-20 details the procedures done in completing the vow.

### **Nazirites as Lay Priests**

What or who is a Nazirite? The word *Nazirite* comes from a Hebrew verb which means “to separate” or “to consecrate.” The ideas of separation (vv. 1-8, 12, 13) and consecration (vv. 9, 11, 18, 19) are built into the word Nazirite.

Throughout the period of his vow, the life of a Nazirite involves separation from three things:

1. wine and grapes: everything from the grapevine, including wine, strong drink, and vinegar made from wine; grape juice, grapes, and seeds or skins of grapes.
2. cutting of hair on his head: his hair should be long.
3. dead body or animal: this will make him unclean. Even if it was his mother or father, he cannot come near a dead body.

These vows remind us of one of the requirements God imposed on the people against uncleanness in Chapter 5: they were not to touch a dead body or animal. They were also required of Levitical priests, although in a less extreme ways. They were to abstain from wine, but only when they were performing their priestly duties. The priests were also not allowed to cut their hair (Lev 21:5), even to disarrange their hair as a sign of mourning for the dead (Lev 21:10). Contact with dead bodies was also strictly prohibited for the priests, especially in the case of the high priest (Lev 21:1-4). Like the Nazirite, he cannot even go near his dead mother or father (Lev 21:11).

It is evident that the Nazirite system is a kind of lay priesthood for non-Levites who want to consecrate his life to God for a time. The word for “separation” (Num 6:4) is also the same word used for the high priest’s crown on his head. Thus, both the high priest’s crown and the Nazirite’s long hair were a challenge to God’s people of their covenant obligation to serve God with all their heart, soul and might (Deut 6:5).

But there are a couple of differences. First, who can take the Nazirite vow? Any Israelite, Levite or not, man or woman, who wants to devote his or her life to God, can be a Nazirite. Second, a person could take the Nazirite vow for only a period of time, while the priest is bound to the priesthood for life.

### **Nazirites as a Mirror to Sinful People**

What was God’s purpose in establishing the Nazirite system? What benefit could Israel have obtained from the service of the Nazirites? It is in this: whenever they would see a Nazirite in their midst, living a “normal” life like themselves, they would be reminded of what they ought to be as God’s people. God chose Israel to be his “*treasured possession... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,*” in order that they should “*obey my voice and keep my covenant*” (Exod 19:5-6).

Thus, every time they saw a Nazirite refuse to join them in enjoying the fruit of the vine, whether wine or grapes, they were reminded of his sacrificial devotion to God, forsaking even the pleasures of life. Whenever they saw a Nazirite with his long hair, they were reminded of one who gave all his life to God, including control over the growth of his hair. And whenever they saw a Nazirite refusing to go near a dead body, even if it was his beloved father or mother, they were reminded of his commitment to keep God’s holy covenant, fleeing from sin and thereby avoiding God’s judgment.

In short, every time they saw a Nazirite, Israelites were reminded of what they ought to be: God's covenant people who were chosen to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

What about us: what can we learn from these Nazirites? Just as they were object lessons and examples to the Israelites, so also they remind us of who we are as believers in Christ: people who are to separate from worldly passions and pleasures to serve God.

Whenever we read about Abraham, Moses, David and other heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, our faith is also strengthened. Every time we read about the apostles and other martyrs in the early church, we too are encouraged in our tribulations and temptations. When we read of the Reformers who lost their lives to defend the faith that was once for all delivered to them, our flagging zeal for the Reformed faith is renewed. And as we see Christian brothers and sisters bearing witness all around us, being salt and light to a dead and darkened world, we too are emboldened to stand up for Christ.

In the same way, whenever we read of holy men of old, including Nazirites like Samuel and John the Baptist, we are reminded not only of our goal of living holy and blameless lives, but that we always come short of this goal. We are reminded that sin is ever-present with us until our death. Like the law, the Nazirite vows convict us of our sin and misery and point us to our only hope in this world, Jesus Christ.

And there is no hope for escape from sin and death except to flee to Christ, the Anti-Nazirite.

## **Salvation by the Anti-Nazirite**

Samson was a Nazirite. He was God's gift to his childless parents, so like Samuel's parents, Samson's parents consecrated him to God as a Nazirite. As a judge in Israel, God gave him extraordinary physical strength, like a Biblical Superman.

But his life in reality was a life of an anti-Nazirite. He broke his vows consistently throughout most of his life. He could not keep himself separate from unclean things, especially because he desired to marry a beautiful Philistine woman. On his way to marry Delilah, he saw honey produced by bees that nested on a dead lion's corpse. It was too good for him to pass. After he arrived at the woman's house, he partied with the woman's family and drank wine, probably until he was drunk. And as he lived with Delilah, he was finally enticed by her to give away the secret to his strength, and in so doing, had his hair cut.

When he broke his vows, he was required to offer three sacrifices – sin, burnt, and guilt offerings – to be restored. But Samson never did. Only during the last days of his life did he keep his covenant vows to God as a Nazirite. In repentance of his anti-Nazirite life, he grew his hair back, recovered his strength, and finally destroyed the Philistines and their idol-god in his death.

There was another man, John, who was born of a barren woman. He was "*great before the Lord,*" did not "*drink wine or strong drink,*" and was "*filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb*" (Luke 1:15). He wandered in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, and preaching a gospel of repentance (Matt 3:1-4). John the Baptist was a true Nazirite until he suffered death in the hands of King Herod, the wicked king of Israel.

### **The Nazarene as the Last Nazirite**

Samuel was an example of the best of Nazirites. He fulfilled his lifelong vows as a faithful judge and prophet until his death. But even the most faithful Nazirites like him were required to offer animal sacrifices – burnt, sin, peace – as well as grain and wine offerings at the completion of their days of consecration. Finally, the Nazirite shaved his head and burned his hair on the altar. His unshaven head and burned hair on the altar symbolized his consecration to God (Num 6:13-20). After all of this is performed, the Nazirite may now enjoy a covenant meal with God.

But even if a Nazirite is faithful during his days of separation, God will never share a covenant meal with him without sacrifices. A Nazirite's best efforts, therefore, will never be enough to be righteous before God. His best sacrifices, like the annual sacrifices that the high priest offers for the people, will never be sufficient to atone for his own sins, much less for the sins of others.

What Israel needed, then, was a Nazirite who would fulfill all his vows perfectly all throughout his life. If there is a Nazirite who was perfectly faithful all of his life, he would not have to offer sacrifices for his own sin. He would then qualify as our perfect Nazirite, the perfect one who would be our sacrifice. He would not have to be a high priest who would offer sacrifices repeatedly. He would be a once-for-all offering for all the sins of all God's chosen people.

And this Nazirite is the one who was called a Nazarene, because he was from Nazareth in Galilee. Why was Jesus the Nazarene the perfect Nazirite? Because he perfectly fulfilled the Nazirite's vow of complete separation from sin and total consecration to God. Though he did not take the Nazirite vows, he revealed what a Nazirite can only foreshadow: Christ's perfect righteousness all throughout his life.

He enjoyed the pleasures of wine, even turning water into wine at a wedding feast. But in the Last Supper, he showed us that the cup was not only for his enjoyment, but it was also the cup of God's wrath that he would suffer so that his people would be acceptable to God. Though he cut his hair, he trusted God completely, saying, "But even the hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt 10:30). And though he did not stay away from the dead – even actually raising many from the dead – he did so to show us that he has the power to redeem us from sin and death.

Although Jesus did not take the Nazirite vows, he fulfilled what their vows foreshadowed: complete separation from sin and consecration to God. Jesus the Nazarene became our last Nazirite because those who believe and trust in him will never be required to fulfill Nazirite vows or any vows of good works for their salvation. Those who believe and trust in Christ will also be able to fulfill their vows of obedience to God because Christ will fill them with his Spirit. They would be separated, sanctified and transformed by the Spirit of Christ, as John the Baptist was in his days as a Nazirite.

### **The Transformed Nazirite Life**

The Nazirite life serves as mirror for you too. Each of the Nazirite's three vows challenges you today in three ways:

- 1. Abstaining from the fruit of the vine represents commitment to a sacrificial life.** Jesus left his glorious pleasures in heaven to live a life of suffering on this earth. He was willing to do

this in order for you to enjoy the glorious blessings of heaven. Are you willing to suffer for a little while looking forward to the glories that await us? Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:17, "*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.*" And again I Romans 8:18, "*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.*" The greatest pleasures of this earthly existence can not even be an inkling of the glories of heavenly existence with God.

**2. Letting God determine when a Nazirite could cut his hair represents our surrendering control of our lives to God.** When bad things happen in your lives, do you still trust God that he will use even sufferings and temptations to shape your character; that he will "*work all things for your good*"? Are you still able to pray, "*Your will be done*"? Are you still able to rest in God's mercy, like Jesus in his hour of temptation, "*not my will, but yours, be done*"? Are you still able to trustfully declare that "*nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord*"? Are you still able to claim that "*not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven*" (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1)?

**3. Staying away from dead bodies represents our commitment to avoid sin and its deadly effects on our lives.** Paul urges you in Romans 12:2, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*" John adds to Paul's exhortation in what we read earlier – that the love of the pleasures of this world is enmity against God, so you are not to love worldly things. The Nazirite life is a life of separation; so is your life as a believer in Christ. The Nazirite life is a life of distinction; so is your life as a believer in Christ a life that does not look like the life of unbelievers around you.

One of the saddest realities in today's churches is that there is no difference between the lifestyle and attitudes of those in the church and those outside the church. Jesus himself said in his priestly prayer in the Garden that you are "*in the world... but not of the world*" (John 17:11-15). You are to live your lives *in this world*, but your priorities, attitudes, and hope are *out of this world*.

## **Conclusion**

Dear friends, do you acknowledge that like a Nazirite, your best efforts to consecrate your life to God fail? Do you confess that there is nothing, even pledges and vows, you could do to remedy your sins, except if you trust Christ as your Savior and Lord? Even the Nazirites, like Samson, broke their three vows of separation. The ancient ascetics, hermits and monks broke their vows of poverty, celibacy and good works. So you must not think that good works performed by Nazirites, priest and monks made them righteous before God. Only by repentance and faith in Christ are we righteous before a holy God.

Do you trust that only the Spirit of Christ can transform your life? From a life of worldly priorities, pleasures, and attitudes to a life that is looking towards heaven? Do you look to things that are unseen and eternal, and not on things that are pleasing to the eyes, and are passing away?

Do you look forward to God's promised inheritance in the heavenly places, even if you haven't received them in this world? These thoughts would be much easier for you if you willingly acknowledge that you are strangers and exiles just passing through in this world.