

NUMBERS

Lesson 17 - Chapter 15

Last week we discussed the great rebellion of the Israelites against Yehoveh, when they refused to trust Him, and so they balked at entering the Promised Land that had been set aside and prepared for them. More, we examined the consequences of this rebellion (wandering for 40 years in the desert, with none of those at the age of accountability being allowed to ever enter the Promised Land except for Joshua and Caleb).

But, we also talked about a foundational God-principle that scholars have dubbed "Vertical Retribution". In a nutshell, the principle is that the divine punishment due the father for a sin against God, can be postponed, and later experienced by his children, or even later generations. And, the same principle also applied to mercy: that is, the mercy due to a father could be postponed and given to his descendants. Today we're going to continue in examining more of the important God-principles that are fleshed out in this chapter.

I want to reiterate especially to newcomers to Torah Class that the NT that is so invaluable to us all is basically only two things: first it tells us who the Messiah that was prophesied in the OT turned out to be along with the high points of what He did and why He did them; and second it is commentary on the OT that takes into account the coming of Yeshua and how it brings so much of the meaning of the Torah commands and the Prophets' oracles into better focus. That is why more than half of the phrases and sentences that form the NT are merely direct quotes from OT scripture.

But we also need to grasp that commentary (ANY commentary) by definition comes AFTER the foundational material. That is, all any preacher should do today (and most do so) is to comment on what has been previously written (specifically, Holy Scripture). The Torah and the Prophets are the foundational material, and so the NT comments on it (Paul especially). In Hebrew this commentary is traditionally called Midrash. So if all one reads is the commentary but not the foundational material, we're going to get some things right and some things wrong. It is the Torah where we'll find all of the foundational God-principles explained in detail. The NT fully expects its readers to already have Bible 101, which is the Torah. Without it, it is likely attempting Algebra without ever having studied basic math. One may well get something out of the Algebra classes, but the meat will be go undiscovered and the reasons that underlie the Algebraic formulas will go unknown and therefore will at times be misused.

We won't spend but a short time with this, but there is an important feature of this Vertical Retribution principle that I would like to make a little clearer. And, it is that generally speaking if a person who committed an offense against Yehoveh was repentant, and contrite,

salach.....pardon.....of the punishment was postponed and transferred to the next generation of his family. NOTE: the punishment was pardoned IN THE FORM of having it passed forward. But.....the sin and the guilt of committing that sin, remained permanently. However, if that next generation accepted and acknowledged that they rightfully bore the iniquities of their fathers.....that they accepted and honored God's principle of Vertical Retribution.....and then they repented for it, and themselves asked for **salach**.....pardon, or forgiveness of the punishment.....then the punishment would be moved onto the NEXT generation, and so on and so forth.

In our modern political era, we call this act of passing the problem forward "kicking the can on down the road". That is, rather than a political leader facing a knotty problem and doing the right thing because it is a politically explosive he kind of finds a way to put a Band-Aid over it and let's whoever the next leader who replaces him inherit the problem. And, of course, typically the next leader is handed this can of worms, and his goal becomes to kick that same can.....and as many others as he is able..... down the road a little further to his replacement.

So, built-in to the concept of Vertical Retribution is the ability to kick the can down the road. The punishment due the sinner is postponed and passed on to the next generation, and if that next generation is contrite, and asks for **salach**....pardon...it can pass the punishment that it was meant to bear forward, and on and on it goes.....theoretically.

Now, let me emphasize: this is NOT some ancient superstition. This is a very foundational Biblical principle ordained by the Creator. It is woven into the entire Word, and it has everything to do with why we need a Savior.

You see God is not a man than He should change. When justice is due to God because someone has broken His commands, justice must be extracted. It cannot be any other way or God is simply fickle, arbitrary, and cannot be taken at His word. However the postponement of justice, and that someone who is innocent can bear the just punishment in place of the guilty party, legally allows God to do what He really wants to do: show mercy to His creatures.

Point being, as thousands of families kicked the can of retribution and punishment on down the road through all the generations of mankind, the buck has to end somewhere; it all eventually has to fall on somebody. It is not an endless road. It doesn't just keep going forward into eternity and then God just forgets about it. But what human could bear all the retribution and guilt that had built up over the centuries, within his own family, let alone for a world full of families? That can of postponed retribution that had been kicked down the road for so long, stopped rolling when he reached the feet of Yeshua.

When we read of how our Messiah paid for our iniquities, it was not just for the iniquities of the generation in which Jesus lived, nor was it only for future generations. It was for "the iniquities of the fathers". The iniquities that had occurred in hundreds of previous generations. And, it was God's principle of Vertical Retribution that played a key role in allowing those destructive divine retributions to be postponed until we had a Savior to bear them for all past generations.

You see, we may have escaped the divine punishment that we rightfully should have

experienced: a punishment that is not only ours by our own actions, but ours due to the sins of our fathers that have been passed down to us. But, even if we were oblivious to it that punishment indeed WAS extracted. It was laid upon Jesus Christ. So, in that way, God's justice was literally fulfilled, as it must be. Punishment was postponed for a long time, but it was eventually meted out, in full, to Yeshua on that Cross.

Yeshua, in many ways, transformed the dynamic of Vertical Retribution. In John 9:1, when a man asked Jesus why a certain man was born blind, he wanted to know if it was the sins of that man's father that caused the blindness, or it was that man's own sins. What this fellow was referring to was the well-understood principle of Vertical Retribution. Jesus responded that NEITHER that blind man's own sins NOR the sins of his father were the issue; rather, he was blind so that the works of God could be manifested in him. And, Jesus proceeded to heal him.

Jesus was showing, and later said, that a man would bear only his own sins; but that meant from THIS TIME FORWARD. From the advent of Jesus forward this was the case. Not because the principle of Vertical Retribution changed or was canceled, but because from this time forward, when God granted **salach** to a man who had sinned against Him.....a man who had ASKED God for **salach** in the name of Yeshua.....the divine punishment was postponed against that man and transferred to Jesus. When a man, in our era, sins.....Believer or non-Believer.....that man.....you, me, anybody.....is due divine retribution. And, a non-Believer will bear that punishment himself; spiritually speaking, it will be after his physical death when he receives eternal death. But, for the Believer, our remedy is to trust in Christ, repent and be contrite, and ask God for **salach** in His name.....and JESUS will bear that divine retribution that was due to us. And, the God-established principle of Vertical Retribution, which we find here in Numbers, is the foundation of enabling Christ's atonement for mankind a viable substitution for what should have been our own personal eternal destruction.

Let's get into Numbers 15.

READ NUMBERS 15 all

This chapter has caused many a Biblical scholar a lot of heartburn because for some this chapter seems out of place. Therefore, they conclude that someone inserted all, or parts, of this chapter at a later date.....perhaps as late as 200 B.C.

But I don't agree with the premise; I can easily see the relationship with the previous 2 chapters and the need to follow them immediately with the contents of chapter 15. As the previous 2 chapters concerned the most serious sort of rebellion against Yehoveh Moses and others had the greatest concern whether or not the Lord would honor His covenants with them, and whether or not He would allow Israel to enter the Land on the same, or similar, basis as had been explained some time before the rebellion. So, to me, the contents of chapter 15 not only fits, it is necessary so that the people of Israel will understand that God WILL bring His people into Canaan.

Therefore, among the first few words of chapter 15, in verse 2, God says "WHEN you enter the land I am giving you to settle in.....". God says WHEN, not IF. So, we see that God's salach.....His pardon..... of the rebellion is sufficient that He simply wants to get on with His plan: settling the Land Canaan with the Israelites. And, from there the Lord gives further instructions.....modified from earlier ones to a degree.....concerning sacrificing.

What is key for us to notice is that the rules and laws He is about to command to Israel, are to take effect AFTER they enter the Land of Canaan, some 38 years into the future. These laws do NOT take effect immediately. In fact, there is precious little way they could practically be carried out because the resources of grain and wine, and a sufficient number of animals suitable for sacrifice under the more stringent and larger sacrificial requirements now being prescribed, can only happen in a settled society when agriculture and ranching is well organized.

So, this chapter shows clearly that God did not reject His people Israel because of their rebellion; and that their unfaithfulness had not nullified God's faithfulness to them and to His covenants. It also demonstrates that repentance PLUS the offering up of proper sacrifices... which in the larger sense indicated Israel's return to respect, and obedience to God's commands.....could bring restoration and reconciliation with Yehoveh.

As we enter verse 3, we find that all the animal sacrifices that are considered as an *isheh* type of offering were to be accompanied with an offering of grain, oil, and some kind of libation (liquid) offering. Now, just WHAT is an *isheh* sacrifice? Well, this has stumped Rabbis and Christian scholars alike. Often it is translated as burnt offering; but that is off the mark because the Hebrew word for the VERY specific type of sacrifice called a burnt offering is '*Olah*. Others translate this as "as offering by fire". This is probably a little closer to the idea. Some think it should be translated as "food offering". In reality, we can't be sure of the original intent; but, Rabbis from before the time of Christ treated this term more as meaning a "gift". Or, in the context of how it was actually practiced, "a gift of food that was burned up by fire". So, any type of animal sacrifice that was a type in which either the priests, or the worshipper, or both could keep a portion of the sacrifice as food for themselves, it had to include a sacrificial offering of grain, oil, and often wine.

Now, forgive me for getting a little deep into the technicality of the exact nature of this *isheh* sacrifice but we need to get used to the fact that there were SEVERAL precise types of sacrifices, each for different purposes, just as we find several different covenants, each with different purposes. One sacrifice did not abolish the others, and neither does each new Covenant God made with Israel abolish the others. We covered most of these sacrifices in Leviticus, and we won't go over them again. And, I am convinced that the reason for the several variations of sacrifices was to teach us the multi-faceted nature of sin and its consequences. Modern Christianity has wanted to make sin a very simple matter: a sin is a sin is a sin; implying that whether you commit genocide on a people, or steal a car, or lie to your mother, it's all the same thing to God. That is decidedly not true, and the Torah methodically and explicitly shows us that some sins and some evils are worse than others in God's eyes. And the method of explaining this to us is by means of the reasons and rituals for each of the various kinds of sacrifices.

Let's not let that statement of "producing a pleasing odor to the Lord" in verse 3 slide by us. I've talked about this before, and asked you to be on the lookout for it. It was an ancient belief.....way before the Israelites were ever around.... that at least part of the purpose for the burning up of animals on an altar was to create a smoke that rose upward into the nostrils of whatever god or goddess was being worshipped. While in retrospect we can take this as a metaphor for the Lord being pleased over the obedience to His sacrificial laws, I can assure you that to the Israelites' minds they were thinking PRECISELY what their pagan neighbors were thinking: that YHWH was getting pleasure from the actual smell of the smoke. This is important because we must not think that just because Yehoveh declared Israel a holy people that they automatically thought or behaved in a holy or obedient manner. They operated from the general beliefs of the world of which they were part in that era. God was only in the beginning phase of a long-term re-education process of His people.

In verse 5 we see the mention of wine being designated as the libation.....that is, the liquid.....portion of the offering. It seems quite appropriate that after the rebellion in which the scouts brought back the large cluster of grapes so symbolic of the idyllic fertility of the Land of Canaan, that God would choose to emphasize the need for wine as part of the sacrificial ritual.

I want to skip now to verse 14 because it opens an issue that is of importance to all students of the Bible, and especially those who already know Yeshua as Savior. If you want to know more details about the various kinds of sacrifices spoken of here, in first several verses of Numbers 15, then go back and review my teachings on the subject in Leviticus.

Now, the issue concerns what our English translations call "strangers" or "foreigners" within Israel. And it centers on what obligations these "strangers" or "foreigners" living within Israel have as regards sacrificial ritual and worship of Yehoveh.

First, probably in our modern world, the best term that gives us a clearer mental picture of what is meant by stranger or foreigners in the Bible is "resident aliens". In other words these are legal immigrants from another race of people, another nation; non-Hebrews who continued living as non-Hebrews, but doing so among the Hebrews. In the Biblical Hebrew the word is **ger**.

So, before we look more closely at just what Numbers has to say about the obligations of a **ger**, let's look more closely at just what a **ger**, in ancient Bible times, was.

First, the concept of a **ger** was, as so much else we find in the Scriptures about very early Israelite culture, common in the Middle Eastern region. So the concept was neither new to the Israelites nor was it a new scriptural invention with a new meaning to the Israelites simply because it was included in the Torah.

In English there is no satisfactory word to translate **ger**. In it's simplest biblical sense it means a "protected stranger". This concept of a protected stranger is sacrosanct in the Middle Eastern cultural idea of what constitutes hospitality. In other words a guest in one's home, even a complete stranger who only happened upon your house in his journey, was not only welcomed

and given food and shelter but also given protection and sanctuary; and this protection was guaranteed by the very lives of the hosts.

But that concept could also carry one step further if that stranger wanted to remain in that village or family. And the idea was that in return for being protected, a person NOT of that tribe would be cared for PROVIDED he was loyal to that tribe who he wanted to care for him. Now the reason that we need to understand the many nuances of a **ger** is that the NT writings explain that gentiles who come to faith in Yeshua are both compared to **gerim** and contrasted to **gerim** (**gerim** is just the plural of **ger**). In other words those of us who are gentile Believers have biblical similarities to a **ger**, but also some important differences. So if we're to better comprehend this mysterious and complex relationship that we have, as gentile Christians, to Israel, we need to better grasp the concept of a **ger** as it was intended.

Perhaps a man named W.R. Smith wrote the most concise description of a biblical ger well over a century ago. And, he said this: "The word ger goes back to a nomadic life, and it denotes a man of another tribe or district who, coming to sojourn in a place where he was not strengthened by the presence of his own kin, put himself under the protection of a clan or a powerful tribal chief".

During their time in Egypt and their flight from Egypt, Israel had many strangers.....many **gerim**.....attach themselves to Israel. The same thing happened when the conquered Canaan.....many Canaanites attached themselves to one Israelite tribe or another as **gerim**. It was common knowledge what the rights of a **ger** were, and were not, in the ancient world. So the Bible doesn't go to any length at all to explain it to us: it was but common knowledge in Bible times.

Because it is so difficult to define the word precisely it is better to discuss the attributes of a **ger**.....a foreigner, a stranger.....a resident alien. First, Israel regarded ITSELF as a **ger** both before it moved to Egypt (while the Patriarchs were living in Canaan), and during its time in Egypt. That is, they were protected strangers, resident aliens, in Canaan and in Egypt because it wasn't their land. In fact, even after they possessed the Promised Land, theologically they STILL saw themselves as ger; and this because God made it clear that while Israel would possess the land, they didn't OWN it. It was Yehoveh's land, and Israelites were essentially leaseholders.

Where did they get that idea? Listen to Leviticus 25:23: **NAS Leviticus 25:23 'The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.**

What the original Hebrew says is that the land is mine, for you are but **GER** with me. By ancient tradition, **gerim** could not own property. So, the Israelites WELL understood what God meant that they were **gerim** with Him: they would NEVER be able to sell their property, because they could never OWN it in the first place. Therefore, gerim had to either be employed as workers on someone else's land, or as craftsmen with trades. Often they were wards of the state: that is, they were under the authority of the tribe, but they also received a kind of welfare to survive.

Just as, theologically speaking, Israel itself were gerim to the Lord even after they possessed Canaan, so were the Levites gerim to the Israelites. The Levites could possess no land, and they were under the protection of the tribes of Israel. Twice in the book of Judges (17:7 and 19:1), the Levites are specifically referred to as gerim among the Israelites.

So, there was kind of a pecking order established. There was NOT full equality between the **ger**, and the tribe or nation he was sojourning among. A **ger** was, in some respects, a 2nd class citizen. Among Israel the **ger**.....the person of another race who came to live among Israel..... had equal protection under the law, but didn't always have the same privileges as an Israelite. Where was the difference? If we can divide Israel's laws into civil and religious, this is where we see the distinctions. In other words, when civil laws such as murder, rape, adultery, theft, etc., came into play, the **ger** and the Israelite were on equal footing, and both were obligated to obey the civil law, be punished according to the civil law, and to live under the terms of the civil law. Let me be clear: this is NOT a law separate from Torah. Torah contains both civil and religious law, and this is what I'm referring to.

However, obedience to the religious laws was another matter. Just as the whole law can be seen as divided into two basic groups (civil and religious), so Hebrews have always seen the religious law divided into two basic groups: the type that prohibits, and the type that commands something to be performed. Sometimes these two types are called negative commandments (those that prohibit something), and positive commandments (those that demand something be performed).

In general, a ger must obey the negative religious commandments, but is not always required to obey the positive religious commandments. As an example of this, the **ger** has no requirement to observe any of the Biblical Feasts (although he is perfectly welcome to join in). However, if he DOES decide to join in, then he must do it properly. He cannot do it in his own way.

By way of an example of how a **ger** must obey a negative religious commandment, we can look to Lev. 17. **NAS Leviticus 17:15 "And when any person eats an animal which dies, or is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or an alien, he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean. 16 "But if he does not wash them or bathe his body, then he shall bear his guilt."**

Where the verse says that this applies to "native or an alien", the Hebrew is "native or **ger**".

This also gives me an opportunity to mention something that I have only recently come to understand, and it is this: that often in the Torah we will see a statement something on the order of..... " There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger..." Or, using our Hebrew, "there shall be one law for you (Israelite) and for the **ger**....". Where I have gone wrong in the past is that I assumed this to be a general statement and principle about the laws of Torah in total. In fact, this is NOT a general principle. It is referring ONLY to the law, regulation, or command that is within the context of that statement. So, when a commandment is given, and then just before or after it says there shall be one law for the Israelite or the ger, it is referring to THAT particular law and NOT all the laws in general.

This is fully validated by many Rabbis, and especially Ibn Ezra. An important thing to understand, indeed.

Now, understanding just what a ger is, and that it is usually translated (though not particularly thoroughly) by the English words stranger or foreigner; and that indeed a ger is a second class citizen, even though they are required to obey the negative commandments just as all Israelites are; I have a question for you. Are you, gentile Christian, a ger among Israel? Or are you something else?

Turn to Ephesians 2:8 - 22.

READ EPHESIANS 2:8 - 22

Aha. Here is the proof we need. Gentiles were at ONE TIME foreigners, *gerim*, to the covenants of Israel. We were strangers, aliens, *gerim* who were excluded, as gerim are, to the NATIONAL LIFE of Israel. But, faith in Yeshua has brought us near. In fact, we are made fellow citizens. So, we are NOT ger, we are now apart of that entity called TRUE ISRAEL by Paul in Romans, and here in Ephesians called the "household of God". We don't become fleshly citizens of earthly Israel, we become spiritual citizens, along with our fellow Jewish Believers, in Spiritual Israel. And, this is all by means of the covenants God created WITH Israel.

We'll go further into chapter 15 next week and begin to address some more of the deep and foundational God-principles found here.