

What's a Nazirite?

Numbers 6:1–21

In our text this morning the LORD gives instructions for Israelites preparing to take a Nazirite vow. As was the case last week with the ordeal of a woman suspected by her husband of being unfaithful, this is a *ceremonial* law—a ceremony that was performed in the tabernacle but has now become obsolete with the coming of Christ. Now that the tabernacle is fulfilled in Christ, the better and more perfect tabernacle, this particular ceremonial law has passed away and is no longer binding. Note that the Nazirite vow includes a whole range of offerings—a sin offering, burnt offering, trespass offering, peace offering, unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, wafers anointed with oil, and drink offerings. This law is clearly ceremonial. It has been fulfilled in Christ and is no longer obligatory. The Nazirite law doesn't seem to have immediate relevance to the church today.

So why preach this text?

The reason is that it is part of God's holy and inspired Word, which is, as Paul teaches, "*profitable* for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:15–17). The church's task is to preach *everything* that's in the Bible, and *nothing* that's *not* in the Bible. God wants us to consider this truth and ponder it and learn how it ultimately points to Christ. So listen with an open mind this morning and pray with the Psalmist: "Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law."¹ You will never be able to understand the message of Holy Scripture unless you are born again of the Holy Spirit, whose new birth restores spiritual sight to eyes blinded by the idols of this world. The Psalmist's prayer, ending with "that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law," is fulfilled literally in today's text; there is indeed is a "wondrous thing" here, as I will show shortly.

But first, what is a vow? A vow is a voluntary promise made to God, which, when once made, is to be kept, if the thing vowed is lawful.² An early example of a vow was the one made by Jacob as he fled from his brother Esau, after having stolen his birthright. "Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and keep me in this way that I am going . . . then the LORD shall be my God'" (Gen. 28:20–21). That is an example of a lawful vow. It is always right and good to vow: "The LORD shall be my God." The general rule for a vow is given in Numbers 30:2, "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath *to bind his soul with a bond*;

¹ Ps. 119:18

² Adapted from Easton's Bible Dictionary

he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.”

Perhaps the best-known type of vow is the marriage vow. A couple takes a public vow to live together within the bond of marriage “till death do us part.” Marriage is to be entered into willingly. The vow is made publicly, before God and witnesses. The record of that vow is recorded in the record of a court—either civil or ecclesiastical. God expects us to keep our vows, and his Holy Spirit empowers us to do that. No matter how difficult your marriage, God can give you grace to overcome obstacles and live constructively with your spouse, to the glory of God. Do not be disheartened, but pray for grace to be able to bear and even to surmount your troubles.

So a vow is a voluntary promise. But what is a *Nazirite* vow? It is a special vow, appointed by God in the Old Testament law, for when a person wanted to voluntarily devote himself to God for a season, for meditation, or for special service. Calvin observes that the LORD God himself was “the appointer of the Nazirite vow.” He cites the prophet Amos, where God says: “*I raised up some of your sons as prophets, and some of your young men as Nazirites*” (Amos 2:11). Saints under the Old Testament could take other vows, but if they wanted to take the Nazirite vow, they had to do it as our text this morning prescribes. This text is the most complete explanation of the Nazirite vow that is found in the Bible.

So the Nazirite vow was just one kind of vow—a special vow. Perhaps a man or woman wanting to take this vow would have saved up money to pay for necessary living expenses, or perhaps other members of the covenant community would see a man’s or woman’s potential and voluntarily contribute to pay their expenses, so the Nazirite could devote himself to God’s work. At the beginning of his period of service he was to be set apart to the work through a special worship service set forth in this text.

But before we go further, a note about the spelling. The earlier English translations—Wycliffe, Geneva, Douay-Rheims, and King James, following Jerome’s Latin Vulgate—used the spelling *Nazarite* (with a middle *A*). Since the American Standard Version (1901), English Bibles have begun using *Nazirite* (with a middle *I*), which more closely represents the Hebrew נָזִיר (*Nazir*). That is the spelling used in the NKJV and ESV.

The sound of the word *Nazirite* recalls to mind the related word *Nazarene*. We are reminded of the account in Matthew 2 where Joseph, Jesus’ legal father, “came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, ‘He shall be called a Nazarene.’”³ Matthew does not give a strict etymology but makes an allusion between the two similar-sounding words

³ Matt. 2:23

Nazarene and *Nazirite*. The figure of the *Nazirite*, whose devotion to God foreshadowed the perfect devotion of our Lord Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, is fulfilled perfectly in the *Nazarene*, the Man from Nazareth. Where does Holy Scripture say, “He shall be called a Nazarene”? This has puzzled many people. The allusion seems to be to Judges 13:5, where it says of Samson, “the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.” Just as Samson delivered God’s people out of the hand of the Philistines, so the Lord Jesus delivers God’s people out of the hand of the greater enemy, the Devil.⁴ This he does perfectly and finally. When on the cross our sins are laid on him, and by imputation his perfect righteousness is credited to us, then his words “It is finished” take on a new, personal meaning. The price has been paid. There is nothing left that is owing, that must be paid by the sinner or by any human priest. “For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.”⁵ Amen! Thank God that Jesus the Nazarene was the *ideal Nazirite*, perfectly set apart to the Father, who accomplished our salvation in his own person and work. The good news of the Gospel is that if you look to him in faith, the salvation he accomplished becomes yours. “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.”⁶ Amen!

Consider verses 1–2 of our text: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: “When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, *to separate himself to the LORD . . .*”’” Notice that the essence of the Nazirite vow is to separate oneself to the LORD—that is, to Jehovah, the great I AM, the only true God, the God with whom we have to do. The word translated “to separate himself” is the verbal form of the noun *Nazirite*. Separation is the essence of holiness. God, and everything he touches, is holy. “I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:45). “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). All Christians are to pursue holiness: “Follow peace with all men, and *holiness*, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). But the Nazirite was to separate himself to the LORD in a special way, intentionally. And the first requirement was that he must separate himself from wine and strong drink (vv. 3–4)—not that these substances are innately sinful in themselves, but that they must always be used with caution. Matthew Poole points out that the Nazirites were to separate “themselves in a great part from worldly employments and enjoyments, that they might entirely consecrate themselves to God’s service.” Wine and strong drink can enflame passions and make a person think that he is entitled to live a life of luxury and indulgence. The Nazirite was to live a simple

⁴ See Calvin, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, at Matt. 2:23 (Logos Bible Software).

⁵ Heb. 10:14

⁶ Rom. 10:23

life, contenting himself or herself to drink water and eat only such food as was necessary for sustaining life. Paul would later write: “Having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8). When John the Baptist came, it is noteworthy that “he did eat locusts and wild honey”—simple foods that could be found in the desert where he preached. It is *false* teachers who make merchandise of the Gospel, who demand large speaking fees and luxurious accommodations. The Nazirite’s focus is on the work of God and getting the Gospel to people who need it, not on feathering his nest and living a life of conspicuous consumption. Moreover, the temptation to overindulge in alcoholic beverages can make a man or woman less watchful and vigilant. The Bible says, “Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life” (Luke 21:34). The Nazirite’s focus is on the work of the Lord, not his or her own personal comfort.

Verses 5–8 teach that the Nazirite was to let his hair grow: “No razor shall come upon his head . . . he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.” What was the Spirit of God trying to teach in this text? The Nazirite’s long hair was a *visible* sign of the vow that he had taken—a sign to himself and to the world that he belonged to the LORD, and that his whole purpose during the time of his vow was to serve the LORD. It is a mark of manhood to cut the hair—something that even nature itself teaches; on the other hand, a woman’s glory is her hair.⁷ But in the case of the Nazirite, his long hair was a daily reminder of the vows he had taken before God, so he would not forget them. A society that rejects God practices androgyny; it tends to blur the differences between the sexes. Feminists claim that a woman can do everything a man can do, that differences between the sexes are a mere social construct, and that a person’s sex is not innate or biological but something that is arbitrarily *assigned* at birth (rather than an innate physical condition that is *recorded* at birth). Children are cruelly told that they can be any sex they want. Physicians, whose first responsibility is to “*do no harm*,” practice the sexual mutilation of children. Feminists call for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated. A Supreme Court justice publicly claimed to be unable to define what a woman is. But while society flounders, the Word of God is clear: God made man male and female, each with their own giftedness. Male and female complement each other, to the benefit of all humankind. The only hope for human society is faith in Christ and radical obedience to him. Obedience to Christ is ultimately for the healing of the nations—pray for that!

Verse 6 continues: “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body.” The Nazirites were not even to mourn the loss of a close

⁷ 1 Cor. 11:14–15

relative, or attend their funeral. They were to keep themselves far removed from dead bodies or anything that would pollute them.

Now it is man's duty to bury the dead—God doesn't ordinarily do that directly! I was very moved this week, when looking at photos with my son, to hear the story of a very active Christian lady in her seventies with whom his family worshipped. She loved the Lord, ministered to the dying while working as a nurse, had an active prayer ministry, visited shut-ins, and was greatly loved, yet it pleased the Lord to take her home to heaven in a freak accident. She was sitting in her car, parked at the side of the road, when a giant crane accidentally fell over and crushed her vehicle, killing her instantly. I'll never forget the photo of her plain wooden casket, adorned with a prominent cross, being carried out for burial. "It is appointed unto man once to die," but "blessed are the dead who die in the Lord." None of us knows when death will strike, but for the Christian, "to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord." "We sorrow not, even as others who have no hope." Rather, our hope is in the resurrection: "Though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God."

The God who made us for himself is life itself. Jesus boldly claimed, "I am the resurrection and the *life*." On the other hand, the great enemy, Satan, "was a murderer from the beginning." To follow Satan brings death, but to follow Christ brings life and peace. It is not wrong to attend a funeral—far from it! Calvin observes that "if it were sinful to weep and lament when our friends are taken from us, Christ would not have wept at the tomb of Lazarus." During his public ministry he interrupted a funeral procession, touched the open coffin, and said to the dead man: "Young man, I say to you, arise."⁸ Clearly the prohibition not to come near a dead body was abrogated with Christ's coming. Christians often have remarkable opportunities to minister to the grieving at funerals. If a loved one or friend dies, by all means go to their funeral, and pray that the gospel of Christ will be clearly presented. Even if it is not, make it a point to share Christ. Thank God that Christ has "abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel."⁹ Amen!

All God's people are chosen out of the mass of humanity, dead in trespasses and sins, and brought into a relationship with Christ and his church. "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." Amen! We are set apart from the world and belong to Christ. As we've emphasized in this series, we are his *property*; we belong to God. But the verb used to describe a person who has made the decision to take the Nazirite vow indicates that something special is happening. Verse 2 could literally be translated: "When a man or a woman *does something wonderful* to make a vow, a vow of a Nazirite, to keep separate for Yahweh. . . ." The verb

⁸ Luke 7:14

⁹ 2 Tim. 1:19

that is used is not the simple word for *do*. It is literally “does something wonderful” (hiphil of אָלַף). In Isaiah 29:14 the threefold use of this word describes the work of God himself: “Therefore, behold, I will again do a *marvelous work* among this people, a *marvelous work* and a *wonder*.” Not that the person taking the Nazirite vow was performing a miracle, but what he was doing was not something ordinary. It was something unique: vowing to forego the pleasures of the flesh and dedicating himself wholeheartedly to God and his service. There were two types of Nazirites: those who took vows for a specific, limited period of time and those who were lifelong Nazirites, devoted to the LORD for their whole lives, such as Samson.

This word is used in Judges 13:19, where Manoah, the father of Samson, was informed by the Angel of the LORD that his barren wife was going to conceive and bear a son. Samson would be a Nazirite (נָזִיר) to God from the womb. Manoah and his wife could hardly believe their good news. Manoah proposed a sacrifice to the LORD. He “took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel *did wondrously* (same word as in Num. 6:2); and Manoah and his wife looked on.” The angel of the LORD touched Manoah’s sacrifice and it burst into flames that reached to heaven—a wonderful thing indeed! This strengthened the couple’s faith that their son Samson should be raised as a Nazirite from birth.

In the book of Acts there is a record of a few individuals who took Nazirite vows for a specific, limited time. It says of the apostle Paul, “He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had *taken a vow*” (Acts 18:18)—indicating that the time of his vow had been completed. Again, in Acts 21, when Paul is on a visit to Jerusalem to give a report to the elders there about his mission to the Gentiles, Paul was advised: “Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have *taken a vow*. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.”¹⁰

In the present day the Nazirite vow has passed away with the abrogation of the ceremonial law with the death of Christ and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Just before he went to the cross, Jesus instituted the new covenant which builds upon and fulfills the old. But the ceremonial law itself is abrogated, having been fulfilled in Christ, the greater and more perfect tabernacle—the sacrificial Lamb who died once for all for the sins of his people, and the great High Priest who ever lives to make intercession for us, according to the will of God.

¹⁰ Acts 21:23ff.

But God still calls upon us to present our bodies a living sacrifice: holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service, and not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:1–2).

Christian, will you do this? Will you, from this moment on, present your body to God to do his will in this world? Will you press toward the high calling of God in Christ Jesus? Will you serve as a soldier in his army, his church?

Yesterday I thought of a hymn I learned at Moody Bible Institute but haven't thought of in over 50 years. It goes something like this:

“How I praise thee, precious Savior, / that thy love laid hold of me; / thou hast saved and cleansed and filled me / that I might thy channel be. / Channels only, blessed Master, / but with all thy wondrous power / flowing through us, *thou canst use us* / every day and every hour.

“Emptied that thou shouldest fill me, / a clean vessel in thy hand; / with no power but as thou givest / graciously with each command. / Channels only, blessed Master, / but with all thy wondrous power / flowing through us, *thou canst use us* / every day and every hour.

“Witnessing thy power to save me, / setting free from self and sin; / *thou hast bought me to possess me*, / in thy fullness, Lord, come in. / Channels only, blessed Master, / but with all thy wondrous power / flowing through us, *thou canst use us* / every day and every hour.

“Jesus, fill now with thy Spirit / hearts that full surrender know; / that the streams of living water / from our inner self may flow. / Channels only, blessed Master, / but with all thy wondrous power / flowing through us, *thou canst use us* / every day and every hour.”

God can use you too, if you surrender yourself to him. Amen.