

God's Gracious Reminder

Numbers 9:1–14

Once again, as in the opening words of this book, our text reminds us that “the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai.” Notice the location: “In the *wilderness*.” As I mentioned when we began this series, though the title of this book in our English versions is “Numbers” (following the Latin Vulgate), its title in the Hebrew Bible is “In the Wilderness.” That is indeed a very fitting title. The events narrated in this fourth book of Moses took place in the *wilderness*. This is not an incidental detail. Israel had been miraculously rescued—saved!—from Egyptian slavery. They had been promised an inheritance—the land of Canaan—but they were not there yet. They had been saved from Egypt, but were not yet in Canaan.

Here is a picture of the church in every age. *We* have been saved from a greater tyrant than Pharaoh—the devil himself. We are saved, but like Israel of old we are still awaiting our ultimate inheritance: heaven. As Peter says: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an *inheritance* incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved *in heaven* for you.”¹ Our inheritance is heaven!

Like Israel of old *we* are saved from tyranny. We are no longer under Satan’s domination. Greater is he who is *in us* (our Lord Jesus) than he who is in the world (Satan). Our duty—every one of ours—is to say *no* to sin and temptation, and to say *yes* to God. We are new creatures in Christ, bound for the Promised Land. We have an inheritance in heaven that can *not* be taken from us. It is secure in Christ. Yet, though we live our lives on this earth—associating with other people, going to the polls to vote, etc.—earth is not our final destination. We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Our citizenship is in heaven.² We are strangers and pilgrims on earth.³

Comparing the time-indicator in our text this morning with the opening words of Numbers 1 gives an interesting insight: chapter 9 has “in the *first* month of the second year,” whereas chapter 1 refers to “the first day of the *second* month.” Chapter 1 gives instructions for taking the first census, or numbering of the people, whereas our present chapter calls the people to get ready for the second Passover. So the order is this: God brings his people out of Egypt; they gather in his presence at Mount Sinai and receive his law; they construct the tabernacle (a project that took the better part of a year); the tabernacle is set up and consecrated; Israel

¹ 1 Pet. 1:3–5

² Phil. 3:20 NKJV; KJV has “our *conversation*.”

³ Heb. 11:13, 1 Pet. 2:11

observes the second Passover as a memorial to their deliverance from Egypt, exactly one year after that deliverance happened, on the 14th day of the *first* month; then, in the *second* month of the second year, Israel takes a census of the people, recorded at the beginning of Numbers.

So in verse 5 of our text today Moses records that Israel in the wilderness kept the second Passover according to the LORD's instructions. We are not specifically told that Israel kept the Passover in years 3–40 of their wilderness wanderings, but we assume that was the case, even as we assume that the daily sacrifices continued, except when Israel was traveling.

The Passover had been instituted in Exodus 12. Israel was still in Egypt. God had said: “*This day* shall be to you a *memorial*; and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an *everlasting* ordinance” (Ex. 12:14). The “this day” was the first month, on the 14th day of the month. Notice: the food of the original Passover meal was the carcass of the lamb whose blood had been shed, and smeared on the doorposts and lintel (upper crosspiece of the doorway) of the of the Israelites' dwellings. If, when the LORD passed through all the land of Egypt, he saw the blood of the Passover lamb smeared around one's door, he would spare the occupants of that household. If, on the other hand, he saw no blood, he would kill the firstborn son of each household as his judgment on Egypt for enslaving his special people. Here is an example of *substitutionary atonement*. Egypt had been warned, over and over again. God had sent nine plagues upon the land; this would be the tenth. In each case, Pharaoh had hardened his heart and refused to let Israel go. Pharaoh had been told repeatedly that Israel was *God's* property, and that he was to let God's people go, so that they could serve him in the wilderness. Each time, Pharaoh had refused. Egypt had been given ten warnings. Now, at midnight, the death angel passes through the land, and in every home lacking the blood on the doorposts and above the door, the firstborn son dies. There is anguish of heart and audible weeping all throughout the land. The LORD had smitten all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, “from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock. . . . There was not a house where there was not one dead.”⁴ A devastating plague!

And all of it was needless! All Pharaoh had to do was to let God's people go, as God had asked. Of course that would have meant the loss of the Israelites' labor. There was an economic cost. But if Pharaoh had obeyed, God would have surely made it up to him. The Egyptians could have become part of God's people! But such was not to be. Pharaoh thought himself to be the most powerful monarch in the world—even more powerful than the God of heaven—and he would not submit

⁴ Ex. 12:29–30

or humble himself. So he learned a lesson: “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”⁵

The Passover lamb is one of the most vivid examples of substitutionary atonement anywhere in the Bible, but it is far from the only one. The firstborn son was sentenced to death, but an innocent lamb died in its place. The innocent lamb foreshadowed the coming of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world—our Lord Jesus Christ, our only hope of heaven.

This past week aging punk rocker Patti Smith, now 79, was given a private audience with Roman Catholic Pope Leo. This raised the eyebrows of conservative Catholics, because Smith is pro-abortion and pro-LGBT—both contrary to biblical teaching. Nevertheless, she was given a private audience with the pope. But in one of her songs Smith blasphemously sings, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine”!⁶ Now I cannot pronounce definitively whether her lyric means “Jesus died for somebody’s sins, but not mine [because *I’m* not a sinner]”—or because “*none of us* are sinners,” or something else entirely—but the Bible clearly states: “Christ died for our sins.” We are *all* sinners. We have all broken God’s holy law and are guilty. The wages of sin is death. All men, women and children on the face of the earth are under the sentence of death and bound for eternity in the Lake of fire. This is the truth of God’s holy Word.

When we hear that God sends the wicked to hell, our first response as fallen human beings is to blame God and say that he is unfair. But that is the wrong response, for man the creature has no standing to bring a charge against God the Creator. God is merciful and gracious. He created man so that we could have a relationship with him in heaven—a place of eternal joy and light and happiness. What he requires is that we obey and honor him and keep his commandments. But man—like Pharaoh—wants to be God! He wants God to submit to him and do things *his* way. But “who has resisted his will?”⁷ Man the creature cannot dictate terms to God the Creator. At the final day, “every knee shall bow” before the Lord Jesus.⁸ He gave his life for elect sinners. He is the true Passover Lamb.

So consider the setting. Here it is, one year to the day after God had told his people to offer the Passover lamb to save their households. One year earlier God had told them: “This day shall be to you a *memorial*; and *you shall keep it* as a feast to the LORD *throughout your generations*.” It was to be to them “an *everlasting ordinance*” (Ex. 12:14). Notice: “This day shall be to you a memorial.” “You shall keep it as a feast to the LORD.” How long? “*Throughout your generations . . . an everlasting ordinance*.” There is nothing unclear about the

⁵ Heb. 10:31

⁶ <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/pope-leo-meets-pro-abortion-singer-patti-smith-as-vatican-official-hails-shared-mission/> accessed 7-31-26

⁷ Rom. 9:19

⁸ Rom. 14:11

LORD's instructions. He intended his people to understand and heed this direct command.

Let's apply this for a moment. When God speaks, man's response should always be: "Yes, Lord. I will obey." He should be like the soldier who salutes and tells his commanding officer: "Yes, sir!" Speaking of Christians in general the Puritan Thomas Boston observed: "We are *servants*; it becomes servants *to be in a waiting posture*."⁹ He is right. If I were a wealthy man, and could employ servants, the kind of servant I would want would be a man who was ready to drop everything at a moment's notice and do precisely what I asked him to do. Such was the attitude of our Lord Jesus, who "came not to *be served*, but to *serve*, and to give his life a ransom for many."¹⁰ So many of us are like a spoiled child who is so involved in his play that when his parent calls, "Come here, son," the boy doesn't even hear, but goes on, absorbed in his play. The tragedy in so many Christian homes is that often the parent doesn't do anything about it but gives tacit approval to his child's inattention, thereby guaranteeing more of the same. As Holy Scripture so often reminds us: "He that hath ears to hear, let him *hear*." "Speak, LORD, for thy servant *heareth*." Let each of us be "swift to *hear*, and slow to speak." May we recognize our duty always to be in a waiting posture—always ready to carry out our Lord's commands.

Are you in a "waiting posture"? Do you see yourself as a servant or a spoiled child? When God speaks, are you ready to hear? In Scripture a hearer of the Word is a person who *obeys*. James says, "Be ye *doers* of the word, and not *hearers only*, deceiving your own selves."¹¹ A true hearer is a *doer* of the Word, and not a "hearer *only*." He is a servant in a waiting posture. His total focus is on obeying the voice of his Lord. To be a hearer-*only* is sin. If this describes you, then your duty is to confess your sin to God, ask him for grace to obey, and amend your behavior—immediately! Don't be content with the status quo. Be honest with yourself. Say: "Lord, I have been slow to hear. I have been treating my own desires and pleasures as more important than obeying God. My focus has been on pleasing myself, not pleasing the Lord before whom I will one day give account." Recognize that failure to hear and act on what God has commanded is *sin*—sin that is unbecoming of a Christian, sin that must be repented of.

In our text this morning it is now twelve months since God had commanded his people to keep the Passover as a feast to the LORD . . . every year . . . throughout your generations . . . as an everlasting ordinance. Now, within two weeks it will be time to keep the second Passover, and the LORD sees that his people are not yet ready. A lot has happened in the last year. Israel has been delivered from Egypt.

⁹ *The Godly Man's Picture* (1666, reprint Banner of Truth, 2024), 126

¹⁰ Matt. 20:28

¹¹ Jas. 1:22

The people walked through the waters of the Red Sea as on dry land. Once they were safely on the opposite shore, the waters returned, drowning the whole Egyptian army! The Israelites had gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, where they had heard God's voice speaking to them from heaven—a tremendous privilege!—and they were terrified. Moses had gone up the mount to speak to God and to receive his law. While he was up there, they had made two golden calves—detestable idols—and God had slain many of their fellow Israelites. At God's command the people had given gifts for the building of the tabernacle, and it had been constructed, assembled, and dedicated. The priests and Levites have been ordained and are now doing their jobs. The daily sacrifices and regular worship of God have now begun, for the first time in hundreds of years. It has been a whirlwind year, and a lot has happened. The people might be forgiven for forgetting that it will soon be time to observe the Passover.

This past week Norma and I had the privilege of hosting one of our grandsons for five whole days—just him. We had a lot of memorable conversations and together-time. His dad came to get him yesterday. A few minutes after he left, I looked with consternation at the calendar—not yet turned to August—and realized that the day before had been his parents' anniversary, and I had forgotten! I could have wished my daughter and son-in-law a happy anniversary, but I had missed the day! I had to settle for sending each of them a “happy belated anniversary”—not quite the same.

In our text this morning God gives his people a gracious reminder: *in fourteen days will be the Passover—time to get ready*. He did not have to do this; he had already told them quite clearly a year previously. His giving them a reminder is an accommodation to their human weakness. How prone we are to forget!

The Bible teaches that God is merciful and gracious. “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more. But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children.”¹²

“The LORD, the LORD God, *merciful and gracious*, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.”¹³

“The LORD your God is *gracious and merciful*, and will not turn His face from you if you return to Him.”¹⁴

¹² Ps. 103:13–17

¹³ Ex. 34:6

¹⁴ 2 Chron. 30:9

“You are God, ready to pardon, *gracious and merciful*, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, And did not forsake them. . . . In Your great mercy You did not utterly consume them nor forsake them; for You are God, *gracious and merciful*.”¹⁵

“The LORD is *merciful and gracious*, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy.”¹⁶

“*Gracious* is the LORD, and righteous; yes, our God is *merciful*.”¹⁷

“Return to the LORD your God, for He is *gracious and merciful*, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm.”¹⁸

Do we deserve a God like this? No, not at all! But this is the God who *is*, the God who created us, the God who called us to himself. He is not a tyrant. He is not a narcissist. He is not self-centered. He is gracious and merciful, and mindful of our human limitations. He is great, and he is good!

Here he is, in our Numbers text, reminding his people to keep the Passover. They needed to be reminded that the God who brought them into covenant with himself cannot be approached apart from the blood of an innocent substitute. Every year in every household an innocent lamb must be sacrificed to remind them of their guilt before God, and to remind them that God was accepting the blood of an innocent lamb instead of requiring their life. The Passover lamb must be sacrificed in every Jewish home; this was in addition to the morning and evening sacrifices in the tabernacle, and the countless guilt offerings and sin offerings. The people must be reminded that “Not all the blood of beasts / on Jewish altars slain, / could give the guilty conscience peace, / or wash away the stain. / But Christ, the heavenly Lamb, / takes all our sins away, / a sacrifice of nobler name / and richer blood than they.”¹⁹

The constant reminders in the tabernacle worship and in private homes show the necessity of reminders in the gospel age as well. In the churches of our Lord Jesus Christ the Gospel is to be set forth every Lord’s day. “Go ye into all the world, and preach the *gospel* to every creature.”²⁰ The Gospel is not just for those who have never heard it. It must be preached, over and over again, to the saints and their children. The Gospel is the church’s treasure, a gracious reminder that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission,”²¹ and that God himself has provided the perfect Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ. As we heard in our call to worship this morning, “Christ our *passover* is sacrificed for us.”²² Make no

¹⁵ Neh 9:17, 31

¹⁶ Ps. 103:8

¹⁷ Ps. 116:5

¹⁸ Joel 2:13

¹⁹ Isaac Watts, “Not All the Blood of Beasts,” <https://www.trinitysalterhymnal.org/hymns/not-all-the-blood-of-beasts/>

²⁰ Mark 16:15

²¹ Heb. 9:22

²² 1 Cor. 5:7

mistake: Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Jesus is the saints' Passover. He is the Passover Lamb, sent by God to die for our sins and rise again the third day. As we will sing in just a few moments: "The day of resurrection! / Earth, tell it out abroad; / the *Passover* of gladness, / the *Passover* of God. / From death to life eternal, / from this world to the sky, / our Christ hath brought us over / with hymns of victory."²³

The Passover Lamb is not still hanging on a cross! He is risen! He is now ascended to the Father, where he makes intercession for the saints. He will keep interceding until every one of his elect sheep is brought safely home to glory.

So God gives his people a gracious reminder: Passover is fourteen days away. Get ready. Select a perfect lamb to sacrifice to me. God would have been perfectly just to have let his people forget the Passover, and to wipe them all off the face of the earth. But he did not do that, because he is gracious and merciful.

Gracious reminders are still appropriate. "Remind them of these things."²⁴ "Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work."²⁵ "For this reason I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know and are established in the present truth."²⁶

God is the God of gracious reminders, and we are glad! Ask him to forgive your sins and make you his child. Commit your life to him today. Amen.

²³ John of Damascus, 8th century, translated by John Mason Neale, 1853, <https://www.trinitypsalterhymnal.org/hymns/the-day-of-resurrection/>

²⁴ 2 Tim 2:14

²⁵ Tit. 3:1

²⁶ 2 Pet. 1:12