

The Law Of The Nazirite

A Summary And Challenge

Every culture has its heroes. Every culture idealizes those who are sold out for a cause. People who have given themselves completely over to accomplishing a task have inspired stories, books, films, and legends. Such is the case with the Nazirites. When one reads the stories of people like Samson and the mighty feats he accomplished, it is easy to become enthralled with the possibility of doing greater things. We, in our modern church culture, look up to people like this. We look up to the men and women of old who gave their whole lives to God in a special way. Samson, though a negative example, is often the first Nazirite that comes to mind. Samuel was also a Nazirite, as was John the Baptist. Though it does not seem that the title of Nazirite, nor the specific purpose of a Nazirite, are applicable to today, when considered in principle, the Christian can find much by way of challenge and encouragement. The title of Nazirite has long been wrapped in mystery and wonder. In this short paper, the subject of the Nazirite vow will be considered, both in its stated purpose and in the requirements it demands from the person.

Defining The Nazirite Vow

The primary passage in which the Nazirite is discussed is Numbers 6. This chapter contains the words of God to Moses concerning what a Nazirite is to be and how they are to carry out their vows. Verse two describes this vow as “a special vow,” in which a person, man or woman, purposes to “dedicate himself to the Lord.” In fact, this is a transliteration of the Hebrew word, נָזִיר, meaning “to separate, consecrate, abstain.”^{vi} This special vow was a voluntary one, done for a specific reason. In some cases, this vow “seems often to have followed upon divine bestowals of particular, requested blessings.”^{vii} This does seem to be the case in 1 Samuel 1:11, in which Samuel’s mother, Hannah, pledged the boy to the Lord if He would grant her to have a child. In a more generic sense, this pledge includes those who are set apart for a specific service to the Lord. This can be a short term service or a lifelong service. In a sentence definition, a Nazirite is a person who has made a voluntary vow of dedication to the Lord to perform a certain service or action.

Prohibitions Of The Nazirite Vow

One aspect, and perhaps the most significant, of this type of a vow is the prohibitions demanded of the Nazirite. There were, as described in Numbers 6, things which must not be part of the life of the Nazirite. Specifically, there were three things from which a Nazirite must abstain.

The first is that a Nazirite must abstain from the fruit of the vine (verses 3-4). This includes both eating and drinking, not solely drinking as many have erroneously believed and taught. These things are not necessarily bad. As one source describes, “The grapes probably stood as a symbol for all the temptations of the settled life of Canaan.”^{viii} Thus, this is a symbolic act of abstaining from the pleasures of the world, being dedicated solely to God.

The second is that a Nazirite must abstain from shaving (verse 5). This applies to both his face and his or her hair. As one foot note reads, “The length of hair would be an outward symbol to others of the Nazirite dedication.”^{ix}

The third is that a Nazirite must abstain from dead things (verse 6). He could not, according to verses 9-12, even accidentally come into contact with dead things. This abstention goes beyond that of a normal Israelite, for the Lord had already described such dead things as “unclean.” The difference is that the Israelite who touched a dead thing was still an Israelite. The Nazirite who touched a dead thing was no longer a Nazirite and would need to proceed through ceremonial repentance.

The Completion Of The Nazirite Vow

Numbers 6:21 states “his is the law of the Nazirite who vows his offering to the LORD according to his separation, in addition to what *else* he can afford; according to his vow which he takes, so he shall do according to the law of his separation.” When the Nazirite had completed the purposed task, he was allowed to end his extreme separation. At this time, according to verses 13-21, he or she is to present themselves to the tent of meeting. He is to offer lambs, rams, foods, and drink as burnt offerings, sin offerings, and fellowship offerings to the Lord. The Nazirite is then to shave his or her head and offer the hair as a burnt offering under the fellowship offering. Afterward, the Nazirite is free from his or her vowed abstinences and is free to cut their hair as they wish and to eat and drink of the vine.

Restoring The Nazirite Vow

In the case that the vow of the Nazirite is broken by a failure to keep the vows, the person then loses his or her state of being a Nazirite, even if the failure was accidental. However, this position may indeed be restored. As John MacArthur writes, “This is a good illustration of the fact that sin can become mingled with the best intentions, and is not always premeditated. When sin is mixed with the holiest

actions, it calls for a renewed cleansing.”^v Through the shaving of one’s head and the bringing of offerings, a person may be restored in his or her vows.

Biblical Examples of Nazirites

There are only, in truth, three known cases of Nazirites in the Bible. Samson the judge, Samuel the prophet, and John the Baptist, all three of which were “perpetual.”^{vi} Samson is perhaps the most well-known as a Nazirite. His account can be found in Judges 13-16. Unfortunately, Samson proved to be a negative example of a Nazirite, breaking every prohibition in his vow, though still being used by God.

Samuel was a positive example of a Nazirite. His story is found throughout the book of 1 Samuel. After his mother, Hannah, prayed that God would give her a child, Samuel was born and dedicated to the Lord. He lived a good life before the Lord, being used to anoint kings and direct nations.

Third, John the Baptist is the only New Testament example given in the Gospels or the Epistles. His birth was also foretold, as was the case with Samson and Samuel. He was used to prepare the way of the Lord, baptizing in preparation for His coming. The Bible does not actually list or describe other Nazirites, either temporary or permanent.

A Sample Sermon Outline For Numbers 6

Propositional Statement: God Wants You To Be Totally Dedicated To Him

Transitional Questions: How Can We Be Totally Dedicated To God?

Transitional Statement: By Learning Three Lessons From The Laws Of The Nazirite

Lesson #1- We Must Give Ourselves Entirely- vs. 2

Lesson #2- We Must Do Things God’s Way- vs. 3-7

Lesson #3- We Must Complete Our Task- vs. 8-21

ⁱ Douglas, J.D., ed. *New Bible Dictionary 2nd Edition*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers Inc., 1982.

ⁱⁱ Tenney, Merrill C., ed. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Cabal, Ted, ed. *The Apologetics Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2007.

^v MacArthur, John. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2005.

^{vi} Tenney, Merrill C., ed. *Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967.

All Scripture Taken From The New American Standard Bible. The Lockman Foundation, 1995.