

Travelling with Israel: Called By God

Numbers 9:15 - 10:36

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It's summer, and it's travellin' time!

We're going to be off in a few weeks - spoke to Jenny at Marine Atlantic and booked our crossing to Newfoundland. Figured out what would be convenient for our family's different schedules, found the times that would work best for us, and passed across my credit card number.

Done, and done!

We'll be on the way.

Many of you will have your own, perhaps similar stories of adventure. Some travelling short distances. Others going way across country. Some for short trips. Others for long excursions.

May God grant each of you safety, rest and enjoyment with those that accompany you.

Have you got your plans made? Did you make them? Are they detailed?

I'd like to think with you about travelling this summer - we'll look at the travelling experiences of another group of people, God's people of Israel. Consider the plans, their route, stops they made along the way, people and places they visited - experiences they had and things they learned.

We'd like to see how their travels shaped them as a nation of believers in God.

Then, in the middle of all our travelling and coming and going, and as we peek in on the journey of the Hebrews, let's think about our collective journey as the Church of Jesus Christ. See it, particularly, mirrored in the desert journey of Israel. There will be differences, of course. But perhaps more similarities than we might first think. And perhaps we can find some points for conversations over a lazy, post-service cup of ice tea as both Calvin and Barrhaven CRC's take a bit of a summer programming sabbath and start to reflect on where and what and when and how next season should unfold.

Let's link up with the people of Israel as they're gathered around Mt.Sinai. They've been at this mountain side for about a year. After the monumental events that set them free from Egypt, Israel travelled rather quickly to Sinai, about 3 months. And there they stayed. The Law of God was given. Some of the organizational details of the people were put in place. They began to develop some sort of national identity. The tabernacle was built.

Finally, it was time to move on. Which is where we begin reading:

NUMBERS 9:15 - 10:36

The journey of Israel and our journey as Church. Nested into the Church's journey, the individual life journey that each of us experiences as believers.

In all cases we look forward.

At different points along the history line of salvation, of course.

Israel was experiencing the very first tiny hints of the Kingdom of God in their life as a nation. They were moving towards Canaan, the promised land of rest and prosperity and plenty where they would dwell with God amongst them. It was all in the future for them.

We have the assurance of Jesus that the Kingdom of God is already here (Mt 12:28; Mk 1:15). And yet, it is still to come in fullness. Which is why we pray, at Christ's command, "*Thy Kingdom come!*" (Mt 6:10). We are still travelling towards the time when the New Jerusalem will come from heaven, and we will live in the New Canaan with final and perfect rest and prosperity and plenty – the time of the return of Jesus when He will dwell with us. Which is why we pray, "*Come quickly, Lord Jesus.*" (Rev 22:20).

Israel travelled towards their rest, knowing that enemies lay in wait, challenges would be faced, temptations would surround them.

We travel towards our rest, knowing that Satan continues to prowl like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Pe 5:8), we continue to face challenges, temptations are never far off - common to all believers (1 Co 10:13).

Indeed, we are travelling with Israel.

If there is one thing, and only one thing, that we take home from tonight's reading about the beginning of Israel's travels, let it be this -

The journey was not something of their planning.

It wasn't according to their timing.

It wouldn't travel along their preferred route.

They were given no map.

They received no schedule.

God Himself kept a very tight and personal control over all that.

Did you notice that from chapter 9?

Count, for a moment, how often we read the phrases "Command of the Lord; Charge of the Lord." Again and again.

What struck me in reading this passage was how off-rhythm the whole thing was. Our family went out west a few years ago. That, too, was a very long

journey. And we timed the whole thing out. Tried to keep going at a relatively steady pace. Not too much. Not too little. Fairly regularly.

That's not how this journey goes. Israel has to follow the leading of the cloud. Whenever, and wherever. No questions. No hesitations.

Just follow.

See verse 21 - sometimes the cloud might stay one day.

Sometimes a couple of days.

Or a month.

Or more.

Or whatever.

No email giving advance warning.

Just watch the cloud.

And follow without delay!.....

....Or be willing to wait.

Does it strike you that the irregular pattern of movement may be precisely to keep Israel on their toes? That it may be intended to make sure that they aren't lulled into a false sense of security, some sort of "*Well isn't that the way we've always done it?*" sort of thinking?

Never mind how it was done in the past - or when.

This is now.

And this is what the cloud of God demands **today!!**

Follow now.

And trust for the future - *trust and obey, for there's no other way. Take a step. Trust that the cloud will show where to put the next step.*

I wish that more Christian leadership material would reflect this kind of thinking.

It's beginning to change.

And for that I am grateful.

But for too many years it was more a case of careful marketing and corporate planning to grow your church.

So much parking.

So big a building.

Such and so a program line up.

Timetable like this and that.

Punch them in - and out pops a successful church.

At least - that's what the textbooks suggested.

Follow the Lord's leading.

Just because previous seasons programs reached successfully into the community doesn't mean it will again this year.

Just because you ran a particular arrangement of bible study groups for the last decade, doesn't mean that this is now they need to be next season.

Or **SHOULD** be.

Henry Blackaby has been very helpful in this regard, reminding church leaders that one of their ongoing tasks is to be prayerfully vigilant to try and understand the timing and the direction of God's leading.

Don't get so busy worrying about policy papers or governance procedures or curtain colour or budget numbers or whatever that you forget to gather in prayer and ask for God's clear direction, ask for the New Testament cloud of the Lord to move the Church where He desires it to go.

As you are planning the agenda for the new season, elders and deacons and program leaders, might it not be a good idea to make this the first item on the agenda for every meeting?

Lord, show us the part of your ongoing work that you want us to be involved in.

Can we look somewhere for a cloud?

Yes, I believe we can.

The New Testament also uses cloud imagery to describe the presence of God. Our Lord was overshadowed by the cloud at his transfiguration, and disappeared into a cloud at his ascension (Lk 9:34, Acts 1:9). There the cloud was with the perfect Tabernacle, which the Israelite tabernacle could only anticipate - the bodily presence of Jesus on earth, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14), full of grace and truth.

Does the cloud continue? Well, consider this - Paul and Peter both compare the human body to a tent (2 Co 5:1-4; 2 Peter 1:13). It is no empty tent. We are told by Scripture that the Holy Spirit dwells in this tabernacle (1 Cor 6:19). Think about the fire that descended on the disciples at Pentecost.

Same fire from the same cloud that was in the desert with Israel.

Which is why the hymn writer William Williams reached back to the journey of Israel, and gave today's Church the hymn "Guide me, O My Great Redeemer", including this verse:

Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield;
Be Thou still my Strength and Shield.

I firmly believe that if leaders of the Church are willing to ask the question, "What is the Lord telling us?" and are willing to deliberate this together, and are willing to pray together, and are willing in that prayer to be open to images in their mind, or thoughts in their head, or tugs at their heart or scripture verses that seem particularly strong, almost magnetic at the moment, and THEN are willing to share that....

....if leaders are willing to consider circumstance and experiences that may be happening in the life of the church at that time...

and if, together, as the Body of Christ, they're willing to ask "Might the Lord be saying something to us here?"

then the New Testament fire and cloudy pillar will most definitely lead.

One of our elders raised an example of that at our last consistory meeting - it's from the life of Calvin Church. Before we engaged in the building program, the elders and deacons did some concerted, hard work in prayer asking, "Lord, should we go ahead with this, or not?" And at the time the word "Strengthen fellowship" kept coming up.

That became part of the mix, and the result has been the addition that in the subsequent years has shown to be an important part in the recent ministry at Calvin, where renewed fellowship has been strongly blessed.

What about when the Lord brings a certain group of people to your door?
Or if He keeps new folk from coming at all?

Should the leadership be asking prayerful questions about that?

And just because a successful church somewhere in Texas used a particular program according to a particular timeline and had certain results, is that for us here and now?

And because you've always had a program for young boys, does that mean it always needs to be run? Every year, all season?

What does the cloud of the Spirit say to the Church today?

Which is the whole point of the first section of chapter 10. Listen for the trumpet blast. A variety of different trumpet sounds are described. Bible scholars aren't exactly sure what they were like, other than that they were unique.

The people had to listen.

When the leaders discerned the direction that God was calling - the trumpets would be sounded, and the people followed. No question.

Can you imagine such a scene in Ottawa?

One characteristic of the CRC in this city, which is not necessarily the case in other communities, is that we are remarkably egalitarian. Which is a wonderful thing in being able to recognize each other as equals before the Lord, coworkers for the Kingdom, and brothers and sisters in the One Body of Christ. Marvelous.

But it carries this drawback - that sometimes when the leadership points in a particular direction, the community hesitates to follow. There can be questioning. Sometimes critique. And sometimes - perhaps the most difficult response of all - just quietly ignoring what the leadership are pointing towards.

So, just as much as Numbers 9 & 10 are a challenge for the leadership to be engaged in the task of prayerful discernment for the Spirit's leading, so there is the equal challenge for the people to hear the trumpet call of God as it comes through the mouthpiece of the ordained leadership.

The call to move forward towards the Promised Land.

The call to engage in battle with the enemy of Christ.

The call to assemble as the people of the Lord.

Two more items, quickly as the proverbial egg timer is running out!

As we listen, and as we follow,

As we travel with the Presence of God clearly among us to guide us, and over us to protect us.....

As we do these things,

we are not to keep it to ourselves.

We are called on a mission.

We are also to call others to join us.

Witness Moses as evangelist.

He gives a personal invitation to his brother in law. "Come join us."

Which is the most successful form of evangelism. By a huge margin.

Most believers can point to family or friends as the major influence in their coming to personal faith in Jesus.

It doesn't always happen on the first try.

Hobab responds negatively at first.

And sometimes we aren't even able to see the result. We have to leave that to the Lord, and to others that he'll place along their path.

We actually don't know if Hobab responds positively the second time, or not. There is some later evidence that he did. But we're not really sure.

Our call as Church, even as we're busy arranging our ranks and lining people up in the correct order and grouping and position for next season's chapter in the march towards the Promised Land,

even in the middle of that,

our call is to be inviting others to join us.

Come with us in the battle against sin.

Come with us to inherit the Kingdom of Christ.

Call them.

Welcome them.

Include them.

And involve them.

The Church is never to be a club merely for the already converted.

It is always an inviting, welcoming community.

A community on the march.

From wilderness to wilderness.

Which is the last item.

Numbers 10:12 indicates they went from the wilderness of Sinai to the wilderness of Paran.

Doesn't necessarily seem like an improvement. Went from one hard place to another! You'd think that after all that lining up and movement and effort there'd be some sort of return.

Like church seasons that sometimes seem to go from one difficult situation to another.

That doesn't always indicate failure.

Or that we're on the wrong path.

We may, in fact, be **exactly** where the Lord wants us to be.

Israel could say that. They were **exactly** where the Lord wanted them to be.

Can we say that?

Depends on how vigilant we've been in our prayerful discerning as leaders and following community, doesn't it?

May the Lord so guide, protect and encourage us in our journey.

And may the day of His return, and our entry into Canaan come soon!