

A Holy Camp

Numbers 5:1-6:27¹

Introduction

Numbers: Week **two** in the book of Numbers (which has some strange stuff in it). In chapters 1-4, we counted 603,550 fighting men and learned the names of people like Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai.

- This week gets weirder: skin diseases, bodily discharge, a bizarre ritual involving a jealous husband and some dusty water, and people who vow not to cut their hair or eat grapes. *Welcome to Numbers!*

OT Relevance: If you drop into passages like this without understanding where you are in the story of the Bible, the Old Testament can feel bizarre, irrelevant, or even troubling.

- It's like walking into a Marvel movie halfway through and there's a talking raccoon flying a spaceship. You're thinking, "Are we not going to talk about the raccoon?" while everyone else is bought in and laughing. **What seems bizarre in isolation makes sense when you know the story.**
 - Numbers continues the story we've traced through Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. God rescues his people from slavery and does something extraordinary: **the holy God chooses to dwell among sinful and unclean people.**
- The question underneath all of this is: **How can an unholy people live in the presence of a holy God?** And ultimately, that story leads us to Jesus.

Context: In the preceding chapters (Num 1-5), God arranged the entire Israelite camp around his presence at the Tabernacle. The people camped by tribe surrounding the Tabernacle (God at the center). That's wonderful news. God is dwelling with his people! But it also creates a problem: **What happens when a holy God moves into the neighborhood?**

- If God is going to dwell in the middle of the camp, the camp has to reflect the character of the God who lives there.
- Who's coming to your house changes how you treat it. There's **family clean**, and then there's **company clean**. Family clean means you shove everything into a bedroom and close the door. If the King is coming over, you're cleaning baseboards on your hands and knees.
 - The house hasn't changed. Who's *in* the house has changed. The amount of mess you're willing to tolerate changes based on the audience.

Holiness: To **be holy** is to be set apart. God is holy because he is utterly distinct—perfectly pure, completely unlike anything corrupted by sin. And when this holy God dwells among a

¹ Numbers 7:1–10:10 largely revisits and supplements material surrounding the Tabernacle and Israel's time at Sinai already introduced in Exodus and Leviticus—dedication, priestly/Levitical service, Passover, and God's presence—while describing Israel's final preparations for departure. The journey resumes in 10:11.

people, he calls them to be set apart *from* sin and *for* him. He takes ordinary people and sets them apart for his purposes.²

God's presence calls his people to holiness.³

- 1. Remove What Is Unclean (5:1-4)
- 2. Be Faithful to One Another (5:5-31)
- 3. Set Yourself Apart for God (6:1-21)

1. Remove What Is Unclean (5:1-4)

¹ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. ³ You shall put out both male and female, putting them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell." ⁴ And the people of Israel did so, and put them outside the camp; as the LORD said to Moses, so the people of Israel did.

Unclean: The first thing God does is command Israel to remove anyone who is ceremonially unclean from the camp.

- In Ancient Israel, the world was divided into holy and common, sacred and mundane, clean and unclean (remember *Leviticus*? Or maybe you're trying to forget).
- These were **ceremonial** and **symbolic** categories, not necessarily **moral** categories. Sin made you unclean, certainly, but it wasn't *necessarily* a sin to *be* unclean.
- In fact, simply living life in a world broken by sin could make you unclean. You could become unclean because of certain bodily functions or a skin disease, or by touching a dead body.
 - Think about a kid after playing outside. He's covered in mud. He really is dirty—but he hasn't done anything wrong. Dirty is a condition, not necessarily a moral judgment.
 - Maybe your pet died, and you had to bury the body or you wake up with some weird rash. You are "unclean" because of the brokenness of the world or your body, but not because you did something wrong.
- None of these things are necessarily wrong; they're all associated with **mortality**, **decay**, and **death** (cf. Lev 11-15). They remind us that we do not live in the world as God originally made it. These cleanliness guidelines reflect the holiness of God in a world polluted by sin and death.
 - Bodies get sick, break, and die. God is the source of perfect life. Death is the great enemy of God's good creation. So things associated with death and decay could not casually come into contact with the holy presence of the living God.
- The issue isn't fundamentally hygiene or germ theory, even if there might have been some sanitary benefits.
 - God has chosen to dwell among his people, and nothing associated with death and uncleanness can be allowed to defile his dwelling.

² E.g., ordinary for a special purpose a la toothbrush

³ Living with a holy God means becoming a holy people.

- We are unworthy to live in the presence of a holy God, and that is particularly obvious in the broken parts of life.
- We are not whole (i.e., *shalom*).
- It might have been easier to understand in a world with its rituals and designations. Our world constantly tells us we are enough; we can be what we want to be, no one can tell us we fall short.
- No matter how hard you try, you cannot stay clean (e.g., Mali rice).
 - Sometimes it's things you've done.
 - Sometimes it's things done to you.

Made Clean: Unclean people are put “outside the camp,” away from the presence of God and the people of God. Uncleanliness keeps them at a distance.

- In the camp is the presence of God. We were created to live in God's presence. Just like the sin of our first parents in Genesis meant leaving God's presence, the brokenness of our world prevents us from being with God.
- In some ways, the whole Bible is asking **how unclean people can get back into the presence of a holy God**.
 - In the OT, God provided ways for his people to be made clean—separation, sacrifices, and even **ceremonial washings**. These physical rituals pointed to a deeper need.⁴
 - But ultimately, we need more than temporary rituals; we need our hearts made clean.
 - That's where the story leads to Jesus. The NT says that through Christ we can “draw near” to God “with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22).
 - How can the unclean become clean enough to draw near? Jesus makes us clean and brings us near.
- When Jesus comes, he touches a leper, instead of being defiled by his condition; Jesus heals him (Matt 8:2-3).
- When a woman suffering a discharge of blood reaches Jesus, he is not made unclean; she is made clean (Mk 5:25-34).
- Jesus walks into a room with a dead little girl and touches the girl, not rendering him polluted, but bringing her to life (Mk 5:35-43).
 - Everywhere Jesus goes, the brokenness is undone.
 - Disease meets Jesus and becomes health.
 - Uncleanliness meets Jesus and becomes clean.
 - Death meets Jesus and becomes life.
- So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify (*make holy*)⁵ the people through his own blood (Heb 13:12). Jesus goes outside the camp, to where the unclean are, to make them clean and bring them back to God
- He bears our sin, our shame, our uncleanness, and ultimately our death so that we can be made clean by his blood.

⁴ “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Ps 51:7).

⁵ ἁγίαση

- He dies, defeating death, so that we can be washed clean and be brought into the presence of God.

New Creation: The gospel doesn't pretend that uncleanness doesn't matter. It doesn't say that a holy God suddenly stopped caring about holiness, but he makes a way.

- In the **Gospels**, God comes near and makes unclean people clean.
- At the **cross**, Jesus goes outside the camp to make us holy.
- And in the **new creation**, everything unclean is finally gone, and we live in the presence of God forever.
 - That's the *direction* holiness is taking us. God isn't trying to keep his people away. God is making a way to bring his people home.
- ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:1-4).
 - In Christ, our shortcomings don't prevent us from God's presence, and a day is coming when that reality will be permanent. Jesus makes us clean.

But holiness isn't just about ceremonial uncleanness. God cares about more than what comes into the camp; he cares about how the people inside the camp treat one another.

2. Be Faithful to One Another (5:5-31)

Logic of Faithfulness: Two scenes: (1) the first is about restitution when you've wronged somebody. (2) *The second is one of the strangest passages in Numbers, about suspected adultery.* There's a phrase that ties them together.⁶

- Verse 6 describes sin against another person as "breaking faith with the LORD."
- Verse 12 describes adultery as "breaking faith" with your spouse.
 - Holiness isn't just about your relationship with God. It impacts how you treat the people around you.

Against Each Other is Against God: ⁵ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁶ "Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, ⁷ he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong (Num 5:5-7).

- In God's society, when someone wrongs another person (e.g., fraud, theft, deception, etc.), it is described as breaking faith with the LORD.

⁶ At first glance, the next chapter has two sections that seem unrelated.

- You cannot sin against your neighbor without sinning against your God. Every person is made in the image of God. How you treat God's image bearers is part of how you treat God.
 - If you can confidently claim a relationship with God but mindlessly harm his image-bearers, then you are deceiving yourself.⁷
- If you are truly walking in God's presence, you will [realize] your guilt, confess your sin, and make restitution.
 - Grace gives you the freedom to admit when you are wrong. When your identity rests in the grace of God, you don't have to prove you're right, pretend you're right, or protect your reputation at all costs. You can realize your guilt, confess your sin, and make it right.
- It's more than just *paying* it back; it's going above and beyond (adding a fifth).
 - God's justice isn't merely punitive; it's restorative. The goal isn't just to pay back, but to make right.
- When you wrong someone, do you seek to move on or make amends? Do you seek to escape the consequences or repair what sin damaged?

Movement of Holiness: Things that happen to you (vv. 1-4,), things you do to your neighbor (vv. 5-10), things that happen in your own tent (vv. 11-31). 🤔

A Strange Test (vv. 11-31): We come to "one of the most" challenging and "perplexing [passages] in the Bible" (Jeon). This certainly isn't the center of Scripture or the center of our faith, but I think, when you understand it in the context of the Story of God's people, it actually makes sense.

- Essentially, this concerns an issue of **adultery**. If faithfulness to your neighbor is important, how much more to your spouse!
- A husband suspects his wife has committed adultery, but there are no witnesses or evidence sufficient to prove it.
 - There are two possibilities: (1) maybe she is guilty, but her adultery has been hidden and cannot be proven. (2) Maybe she is innocent, and she's living under a false accusation of a jealous husband.
- Either way, there is no human way to settle it.

¹¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ¹² "Speak to the people of Israel, If any man's wife goes astray and breaks faith with him, ¹³ if a man lies with her sexually, and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband, and she is undetected though she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her, since she was not taken in the act, ¹⁴ and if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife who has defiled herself, or if the spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife, though she has not defiled herself, ¹⁵ then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her...(Num 5:11-15).

¹⁷ And the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel and take some of the dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. ¹⁸ And the priest shall set the woman

⁷ E.g., I'm walking with Jesus but cheating my friend out of money; I love God, but refusing to forgive her.

before the LORD and unbind the hair of the woman's head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, which is the grain offering of jealousy. And in his hand the priest shall have the water of bitterness that brings the curse.¹⁹ Then the priest shall make her take an oath, saying, 'If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband's authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse.'²⁰ But if you have gone astray, though you are under your husband's authority, and if you have defiled yourself, and some man other than your husband has lain with you,²¹ then' (let the priest make the woman take the oath of the curse, and say to the woman) 'the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh fall away and your body swell.'²² May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.' And the woman shall say, 'Amen, Amen' (Num 5:17-22).

- The husband brings his wife before the priest at the Tabernacle. The priest takes holy water, mixes it with dust from the Tabernacle floor, loosens the woman's hair, places a grain offering in her hands, writes the words of the curse, and washes them into the water. The woman swears an oath of innocence and drinks the water.
- If she is guilty, God judges her. The water that brings the curse shall enter into her and cause bitter pain, and her womb shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away, and the woman shall become a curse among her people (Num 5:27).
- If she is innocent, nothing happens, and she is vindicated. She shall be free (Num 5:28).
- These aren't the verses you see on a Hobby Lobby inspirational home decor.⁸

Objections: This scene can feel **arbitrary** and **superstitious**, and even a little **misogynistic** at first.

- Actually, if you look at the details, especially in light of the **patriarchal** and **patrilineal** context it is written from, you'll notice how it protects the woman as well.
 - The husband does not get to decide that she is guilty. His suspicion is not a verdict. He cannot simply take matters into his own hands; he has to bring the matter before God.
 - The ceremony is designed to expose her guilt if she is guilty, but it is equally designed to establish her innocence if she is innocent. In a society where an accusation from a husband could leave a woman extraordinarily vulnerable, that matters.⁹
- There is an obvious cultural and ritual gap between us and this Ancient Near Eastern world of Numbers.¹⁰
 - Dusty water, loosened hair, written curses, swelling bellies, and falling thighs sound bizarre to us.
 - But strange does *not* mean superstitious. There is nothing magical about the water, dust, or ink any more than there is something magical about the water of

⁸ Or In-n-Out cup.

⁹ Elsewhere in the Torah, adultery is certainly not treated as merely a woman's sin: both the adulterous man and woman are held guilty. Cf. Lev 20:10, Deut 22:22.

¹⁰ *Sotah* (סוטה) means essentially "a woman who has gone astray" or "one suspected of straying." It comes from the Hebrew verb סוּת (sut), "to turn aside, go astray" (the verb used right in Num 5:12).

baptism, the bread and wine of communion, or putting a ring on someone's finger at a wedding. **Rituals use physical actions to embody invisible realities.**¹¹

- The ritual doesn't determine the woman's guilt; God does. God is the one who knows the truth, and God is the one who judges. That's the point.

The Story Gives Clarity: If we pause our modern judgment,¹² and understand this passage within the story of Numbers, the story of Israel, and the story of Scripture, we might hear the themes of the gospel shine through.

- Marriage has been God's good design from the beginning (cf. Gen 1-2).
- But marriage is not simply a private arrangement between two people; it is a picture of God's covenant faithfulness and love. Paul says "this mystery is profound, and... refers to Christ and the church" (Eph 5:32).¹³
- Throughout Scripture, God is the faithful husband, and Israel is his covenant bride. Tragically, what this woman is accused of doing to her husband is exactly what Israel will eventually do to God: **break faith**. Israel will chase after other gods, and the prophets will call it adultery.
 - So this strange ceremony isn't a random interruption in Numbers. **Faithfulness matters in a holy camp because God himself is faithful.**
- The word **jealous** shows up repeatedly here, which can seem like a negative emotion, but it's not always. God is a jealous God (Ex 34:14) because the love of his people rightly belongs to him, and he will not share their worship with another. He isn't insecure or envious; he is fiercely committed to the covenant relationship he has with his bride and will not share her love with another.

Grace Connection: As the story of Scripture unfolds, we know that God shows grace and mercy to sexual sinners.

- Jesus receives and calls sinners to follow him. But that call does not ignore holiness; it invites it. Jesus forgives sinners, then tells them to "go, and... sin no more" (Jn 8:11).
- Grace doesn't say, "Sin doesn't matter"; it shows us that we can be forgiven and don't have to keep living that way.
- "Grace isn't permission to sin; it's power not to" (Smethurst).

God's presence calls his people to holiness, and holiness means keeping faith—with God and with one another. Chapter 5 is all about what to do when you are polluted by sin, either yours or

¹¹ Modern readers aren't the first people to have questions about this passage. Jewish rabbis discussed its details for centuries—there is an entire tractate of the Mishnah devoted to it. Interestingly, they generally weren't embarrassed by the basic idea. They understood this as a way of taking a case that human beings could not resolve and placing judgment in the hands of God. See *Mishnah Sotah*, especially 1:1–6; 2:1–6; 3:1–5; 9:9. The tractate extensively discusses the circumstances leading to the ordeal, the Temple procedure, the effects of the water, and the eventual cessation of the practice. See also *Babylonian Talmud, Sotah* 27b–28a, which interprets the ordeal as implicating the male adulterer as well as the woman; cf. *Mishnah Sotah* 9:9, which reports that Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai discontinued the practice when adultery became widespread, citing Hosea 4:14. Josephus also describes the procedure in *Antiquities of the Jews* 3.270–273.

¹² I.e., chronological snobbery (HT Lewis).

¹³ Interestingly, the previously referenced chapter in Hebrews also mentions marital fidelity: "Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous" (Heb 13:4).

the world. But chapter 6 turns to something you can control. It is a picture of someone voluntarily choosing to set themselves apart for God in an unusual way.

3. Set Yourself Apart for God (6:1-21)

¹ And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, ³ he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink. He shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried. ⁴ All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, not even the seeds or the skins. ⁵ “All the days of his vow of separation, no razor shall touch his head. Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. He shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long. ⁶ “All the days that he separates himself to the LORD he shall not go near a dead body. ⁷ Not even for his father or for his mother, for brother or sister, if they die, shall he make himself unclean, because his separation to God is on his head. ⁸ All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD (Num 6:1-8)

Voluntary Holiness: Chapter 5 has mostly dealt with holiness when something has gone wrong. You become unclean. You sin against somebody.

- But chapter 6 is different. Nobody has done anything wrong. This is voluntary.
- A man or a woman looks at the God dwelling in their midst and says, “I want to set myself apart for God in an unusual way.”
- You don’t have to be a priest or come from an important family; **anyone could voluntarily set himself or herself apart to the LORD.**
 - This shows up throughout the Bible:¹⁴ **Samson** was a famously hypocritical Nazirite,¹⁵ some speculate that **John the Baptist**¹⁶ and the **Apostle Paul** took Nazirite vows at different points.¹⁷ **Josephus** says these vows were popular in Second Temple Judaism.¹⁸
- “[Something like the] monks and nuns of ancient Israel, laymen or women who consecrated themselves to the total service of God, usually for a specific period of time, though more rarely for life” (Wenham).

Nazirite: The word *Nazirite* comes from a Hebrew word meaning “to separate” or “set apart.”¹⁹ It has nothing to do with Nazareth—Jesus the Nazarene and a Nazirite are two different things.

- The vow involved some strange specifics.
 - Don’t eat grapes (raisins, grape juice, wine).
 - Don’t cut your hair.

¹⁴ Each case is exemplary for Israel’s calling and vocation through voluntary and wholehearted separation unto God” (Morales).

¹⁵ Judg 13:5

¹⁶ Lk 1:15

¹⁷ Acts 18:18, Cf. Acts 21:23-26

¹⁸ *Antiquities* 19.293–94; cf. *War* 2.313

¹⁹ נָזִיר; different from Heb. for holy (קָדוֹשׁ). Etymologically distinct, conceptually related.

- Don't go near a dead body (can't go to a viewing).
- All of this is to make it undeniable that someone is set apart to the LORD (cf. vv. 2, 8).
 - The wine wasn't evil. Grapes weren't sinful. Cutting your hair wasn't sinful. Going to your mother's funeral wasn't sinful.
 - For a time, this person voluntarily gave up good and ordinary things as a physical way of saying, "My life belongs to God."
 - That's the heart of holiness: **I belong to him.**

The Point: We don't become Nazirites. You don't need to stop eating raisins or start growing your hair out. That's not the point.

- But the impulse behind the vow should sound very familiar to Christians.
- "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).
- Not part of yourself, all of yourself.
 - God's presence calls his people to holiness.
- Holiness isn't merely removing bad things from your life. It isn't just avoiding uncleanness or refusing unfaithfulness.
 - Holiness is giving yourself completely to God.
 - My time, body, money, sexuality, relationships, job, and future belong to God.
- The question shouldn't be merely, "What am I allowed to do?" Rather, "What would it look like for this part of my life to be set apart for God?"
 - Maybe you voluntarily lay down good things because you want God more. Not because the thing is sinful. Not because giving it up makes God love you more. But you want to see God more clearly.
- What would it look like to give myself unusually and intentionally to God?²⁰

The Nazirite gives himself to God, but the chapter doesn't end with what Israel gives God. It ends with what God gives Israel.

Conclusion

²² The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

²⁴ the LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

²⁷ "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

- "Probably one of the oldest poems in Scripture," (Wenham), "a theological and architectural gem, luminous and radiant from diverse angles" (Morales)

Progression: Remove the unclean > Make wrongs right > Be faithful > Set yourself apart

²⁰ Remove what is unclean. > Be faithful to one another. > Set yourself apart for God.

- The goal of holiness is God's presence.
- Israel wanted God in their camp, dwelling among them. The sin and uncleanness obscured their vision of God.
 - The blessing is a promise to **see God**: His face shining on His people.
- “[Without] holiness... no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14).
- Holiness is not an obligation to make God love you, but an invitation to see God.
 - When sin is removed and distractions are cleared, God’s presence becomes apparent.
- The gospel promises that Jesus gives us righteousness and cleanses us so we can be holy. He brings us near.

If you have never experienced the presence of God, the presence you were made to know, you can come near through Jesus.

- When you experience the presence of God in Christ, you are happy to remove what is unclean and to separate yourself from the things of this world.
- **Holiness is not a burden; it’s a gift.** God’s presence calls his people to holiness.