

## STAY ON TRACK WITH GOD'S GUIDANCE

Numbers 9:1-11, 15-19

I grew up in an area of the country that had a flat topography and most of the roads ran east-west and north-south. In that environment, I had a pretty good discernment of direction as to which was north. When I came to east Tennessee with its hills and curvy roads, I was not sure which direction is east or west. I have found that I don't have a built-in compass when roads aren't straight and corners aren't right angles. In a similar way, when life is simply, then just following our consciences works fairly well, but when things in life aren't straightforward and clear cut, then we need guidance that is beyond ourselves.

Many people today rely on Global Positioning System devices to help them when driving in an unfamiliar area. There is a commercial for one of the insurance companies that features a character called "mayhem." In one of those, "mayhem" is a GPS system that gives wrong directions and causes a wreck. The message from the insurance company is that you need to buy the right insurance to protect yourself from "mayhem." Another, and perhaps better, message is that we need to make sure that the GPS that we are using is reliable and true.

Whether we realize it or not, all of us rely on some set of principles for guidance and if those principles are not based on truth, then we can find ourselves getting into situations that are problematical or dangerous or being confused as to where we are or what we should do.

In the account of the journey of the Children of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land given in the book of Numbers, we find an account regarding the second observance of the Passover. The first Passover was observed just prior to the exit from Egypt and the second observance was closely connected to leaving the encampment at Sinai where they had spent nearly a year. We will look at the information Moses left us and discover some basic principles that will help us stay on track in our journey in life.

### When Commands Are Clear: Obey – 9:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Thus the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, <sup>2</sup>"Now, let the sons of Israel observe the Passover at its appointed time. <sup>3</sup>"On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall observe it at its appointed time; you shall observe it according to all its statutes and according to all its ordinances." <sup>4</sup>So Moses told the sons of Israel to observe the Passover. <sup>5</sup>They observed the Passover in the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the LORD had commanded Moses, so the sons of Israel did. Numbers 9:1-5 (NASB95)

The Passover pointed to God's means of salvation to bring lost mankind into a proper relationship with Himself. The first and foremost priority when we are looking for guidance from God is to be connected to Him through His provision to restore the lost connection caused by sin. If we are estranged and/or separated from God, then we will not be able to benefit from the guidance He gives.

What are the components of staying on track? What can we learn from the instructions God gave through Moses regarding the Passover celebration that relates to staying on track? If we are going to walk in God's will, timing is important. The Passover was to be observed "at its appointed time." The timing was very specific even to the hour of the day. So many times we find ourselves in situations that need some intervention and we may wish to help. Offering help at the wrong time is likely to be rejected and may do more harm than good.

Solomon had noted in Ecclesiastes 3:1 "To everything, there is a season." If we ignore the seasons of life (ignore the proper timing), then we may find that our good intentions to do the right thing will produce unintended consequences. There are some things that are obviously

wrong in their timing in a larger scale context such as providing graphic sex education to children in the public school system. On a shorter time scale, timing issues may result from rushing to judgment before having all the facts or getting involved in the middle of a heated controversy between two people.

In the Passover observance, not only was the timing important but the specifics of “what was to be done” was part of the total package of being obedience to God’s instructions. In the fuller account of this observance that was given before the deliverance from Egypt (the Exodus account), we find very detailed instructions that were to be followed. God had them do certain things in order to provide protection for themselves when the judgment came upon the land of Egypt. These things they were to do also had a purpose to prepare future generation to be able to receive the truth that would be revealed in the fullness of time when Jesus came to fulfill all that was contained in the law.

Not only were they to be careful about **when** and about **what** they were to do, they were to carry out God’s commandments in a specific **way** – according to all the statutes and ordinances. It is difficult for most of us to put it all together and realize that obedience or doing the right thing involves more than just what we do, but how we do it and when we do it. We can carry this list of criteria even further if we go back to the Exodus account and see that **who** does what is also important. Specific family members had assigned responsibilities during this celebration. Although it is not emphasized in the Old Testament account, we know from the teaching of Jesus about obedience that **why** we do various things can be as important (or more so) than what, how, when, and who.

#### When Complications Arise: Pray – 9:6-11

<sup>6</sup> But there were *some* men who were unclean because of *the* dead person, so that they could not observe Passover on that day; so they came before Moses and Aaron on that day. <sup>7</sup> Those men said to him, “*Though* we are unclean because of *the* dead person, why are we restrained from presenting the offering of the LORD at its appointed time among the sons of Israel?” <sup>8</sup> Moses therefore said to them, “Wait, and I will listen to what the LORD will command concerning you.” <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>10</sup> “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘If any one of you or of your generations becomes unclean because of a *dead* person, or is on a distant journey, he may, however, observe the Passover to the LORD. <sup>11</sup> ‘In the second month on the fourteenth day at twilight, they shall observe it; they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Numbers 9:6-11 (NASB95)

You have probably experienced a situation where you were driving somewhere and you had mapped out the route and all was going well until you came to an intersection that had a sign that said “Road Closed, Detour.” If obedience is following the “road map,” then a closed road with a detour is a complication that has to be addressed if you are going to wind up at your original destination. One of the requirements for a person to participate in the Passover observance was that the people were to be ceremonially undefiled. As we have seen in other passages, one of the more common causes for a person to be accidentally defiled was to suddenly come in contact or be in close proximity to a human corpse. The period for purification was seven days and so it was not something that could be instantaneously corrected by the priest saying a prayer and sprinkling them with water or whatever.

The consequence of not observing the Passover or of observing it in an unclean (defiled) condition was that the person was to be “cut off” from the people of Israel. This was a serious concern. If we look past the above passage we find in verse 13 that a new stipulation to Passover observance addressed the situation of someone who was eligible and available to take part in the festival but refused to do so. The penalty was that the person must be excommunicated from the community and bear the consequences of his sin. Some commentators have suggested that the excommunication meant death.

Since the observance was so significantly important, a provision was made to get around the dilemma of not being able to participate because of being defiled. The provision was very simple. The person simply made a detour of one month and then would go through the same observance and that would satisfy the requirements of the laws related to the Passover.

Notice that Moses did not know the answer to the question that the “unclean” persons raised. This is significant in that we need to realize that the laws and commandments that we are aware of may cause some conflicts in what different parts or areas of the law call for us to do. For example, in previous studies, we have addressed such issues related to Paul’s admonishment to “obey those in authority” and the situation that Peter and John encountered with the Sanhedrin (an authoritative body) and told them that they “must obey God and not man.” Clearly, there are complications that can arise that have not been specifically addressed and we (as Moses discovered) need to seek specific divine guidance to do what is acceptable to the overall intent of the various principles given to us in the Scriptures. Our understanding of how to seek such specific guidance is through prayer. Basically, if we lack “wisdom,” then we simply follow the advice given in the letter written by James. We are to ask in faith and then trust God to provide an answer.

#### When Guidance is Delayed: Stay – 9:15-19

<sup>15</sup> Now on the day that the tabernacle was erected the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and in the evening it was like the appearance of fire over the tabernacle, until morning. <sup>16</sup> So it was continuously; the cloud would cover it *by day*, and the appearance of fire by night. <sup>17</sup> Whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp. <sup>18</sup> At the command of the LORD the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped. <sup>19</sup> Even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for many days, the sons of Israel would keep the LORD’S charge and not set out. Numbers 9:15-19 (NASB95)

Just when you think you have all the bases covered with regard to doing what you should be doing, then you run into something else and you can’t find a law that defines what you should do. You might even encounter a conflict in two laws or rules and you can find an answer for this situation in prayer or through wise counsel. What happens when there are no specific rules to help you choose or decide what you should do? You might think it would be helpful if you just knew the goal, destination or the end point of your journey. That is not always the case. The Children of Israel knew that their destination was the land of Canaan. If you just do the obvious, then you would realize that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. As you well know, that was **not** the plan that God had in mind. He took them in a direction that was 90 degrees away from the straight line path. At Mt. Sinai He gave them the commandments and various laws of things they were to do, but nothing was in those laws about getting to Canaan.

We had noted earlier that obedience involved who, what, when, how and why. The “who” was pretty well understood to be the descendants of Israel. The “what” was to get to Canaan. The “when” was a big question mark. They probably wanted to do it now. The question of “how” was something they had not faced up to as yet. They thought they knew why they were going and it to possess the land and live lives that were prosperous because it was a land flowing with milk and honey. The details of this operation were not like the well-defined prescription for celebrating the Passover. They were not written down in a step one, step two, step three process.

Can you see any parallels of what they were facing with what everyone faces in just living life on a daily basis? We should have fairly good general idea of what the goals and end points of life are. OK, so, most people don’t have any idea that would be. Even if they did have

goals and destinations defined, they would still be at a point of considerable uncertainty about the when, how, and where of accomplishing what they believe is their goal in life.

As Christians, we should know with certainty the goal for our lives. We find that well defined for us in Romans 8:29 that tells us that we are to be conformed to the image of Christ Jesus. So how do we do that? As you are thinking about that, let's go back to what was happening in the wilderness with the Children of Israel on their journey. One of things they did after the law was given to them at Mt. Sinai was to stay in the encampment they had and they worked almost an entire year to build a Tabernacle that would be suitable for housing the Ark of the Covenant. We are told in the Exodus account that when the Tabernacle was finished that the glory of God came and covered and filled the place.

This glory (the cloud) was visible evidence of God's presence in the camp of His people. It appeared to be a cloud in the day time and it had an appearance of fire by night. God used this manifestation to provide guidance for the people that would let them know when they were to relocate and would guide them to a new encampment site. Do you think this awesome display of the presence of God in their midst was a comfort or a terror? Could be some of both.

What did Jesus tell His disciples what was going happen after He went away from them. In John chapter 14 He told them that He would send them another Comforter that would be with them. In chapter 16, He told them that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. Do you think that we are seeing something of a parallel in how God guided the Children of Israel and how He guides us? He gave them His word and His very presence. What are we provided with? He has given us His word and His very presence in the person of the Holy Spirit that is not only with us but is in us.

There are times in life when we just don't have a clue as to what we should do in a given set of circumstances. We might search the scriptures and pray and seek the council of Godly people and we still don't have a clear-cut answer about what we are to do. This is when the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is so critically important. We have the promise that He will guide us into the truth. Sometimes this takes a lot of faith and patience to wait until the Spirit moves. Many times I have been in a quandary about what to do and how to do it and then after a while of what seems like chaos or confusion, it suddenly becomes perfectly clear what the answer is. How does that happen? The simple answer is that God works in mysterious ways and that He is faithful to His promises. Our part is to trust and obey.

When we are obedience when the directions are clear and when we prayer and seek understanding of how to handle complications, then we are more likely to be able to discern what and when and how He leads us when the life choices are not clear cut and simple. Many people learn the "hard way" that without God's guidance that they cannot stay on track.