

Sermon on Numbers 1:47-2:34 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Numbers 1:52-2:34

Followers of Jesus have Him as the undeniable center of their lives.

As I was studying this week I kept coming back to the game “capture the flag.” Rightly played there are two teams, each with a flag well within its ranks, and the goal is to invade and capture the other team's flag. Essentially teaching little kids basic military strategy! The flag is important, the standard of the team and if it is lost, everything is lost.

Subconsciously we live our lives protecting some “flag.” Things that we hold as vitally important. Really good things, family, work, health. And some not so good things, lust, pride/ego, addiction...

Things that we have been trying to capture for so long we hold onto them with all we've got. And if they are lost, everything is lost.

Kids reading Ecclesiastes this week on the way to school. Everything is futile!

We live “camping” around things that end up defining us. But still we are faced over and over again with the question - is this what I am made for?

Maybe those “flags” aren't supposed to take the vital place!

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From a camping map we get this? *Yes!*

Just off of a census, God instructs the people how the tribes of Israel will position themselves and the order in which they will travel.

They are going somewhere! Heading to the Promised Land. The place of their flourishing and rootedness with God.

The text then moved from army roster to formation orders. This is how they will travel.

Levites not listed - special work we will see more of next week.

We could analyze the order, make something of the map, but what I sense is for us is what's at the center.

Proximity as Presence

The order, the line up, the movement of Israel and each tribe under their standards (flags), had purpose and shape because of what they camped around.

The King (the Lord) is at the camp's center (the "tent of meeting"). This was the common practice of other ancient Near Eastern kings around this time (e.g., Rameses II, king of Egypt, 1200s BC).

The tent of meeting, the Tabernacle.

The tabernacle of Moses was the temporary place of worship that the Israelites built according to God's specifications while wandering the desert and used until King Solomon built a temple. The word tabernacle is a translation of the Hebrew mishkan, which means "dwelling-place."

The tent was divided into two rooms: the Holy Place, where the table of showbread, the golden lampstand, and the altar of incense sat; and the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed.

The purpose of the tabernacle of Moses was to provide a place where the people could properly worship God. Priests sacrificed animals on the altar in the outer court. The bread of the presence, the continually burning lampstand, and the offering of incense were all in the Holy Place.

Was also what guided Israel on the journey.

Numbers 9:15–19 "On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. [16] So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. [17] And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped. [18] At

the command of the LORD the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the LORD they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. [19] Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the LORD and did not set out.” (ESV)

The center tells them when to move and when to stay. It is the place they meet God, where they worship him.

The temporary place of mediation between God and his people - until the Temple, and ultimately a new temple...

It is the undeniable center of Israel as they journey in the wilderness. Even when moving it remains as the center.

The center of the camp is the place of presence - access to God. And it is a holy place. Had to be careful around it!

Numbers 1:51 “When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.” (ESV)

Numbers 1:53 “But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no **wrath** on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony.” (ESV)

God is utterly holy, different, set apart. Sin can not dwell in his presence. So not only is this the place of presence, it can be a dangerous place.

We know the presence of God changes things and leaves a mark - Moses glowing.

Even in this proximity though there is disobedience. The people could see the pillar of cloud and fire - but still they will chase after other “flags” and miss the destination. Leaves the people, and those hearing the story, longing for the Promised Land, for permanence in God’s presence.

“At the very center of this vast and complicated arrangement of an enormous people was a simple reality: the presence of God was to be at the heart of everything they did. After all, the presence of God with his people was the goal of the covenant that the Lord made with Israel, in which he promised, “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” ID

Humanity is no longer camping around a tent, or a temple. Something better has come that this account in the wilderness is merely a whisper of.

The camp map is different in Christ.

Jesus came to do more than simply show us God. He came to bring us into God’s presence by equipping us with his perfect righteousness, imputed to us by grace. That is what bridges the gap between God’s holiness and our sin: Christ gave us his holiness that enables us to be welcomed in. The guards are waved aside, and we can enter into God’s presence, clothed in his righteousness.

His presence is now a safe place for those in Christ.

There is no need for the tabernacle or temple because God himself came and set his tent up with us.

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (ESV)

The theme of the Lord dwelling among his people goes from Genesis (3:8) to Revelation (21:3) and was perfectly fulfilled when Jesus, the God-man, “made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14)

“The Old Testament tabernacle is where God moved in and lived with his people. This tabernacle had no meaning apart from Jesus Christ. Its whole purpose in the wilderness was to point people forward to the true Tabernacle who was to come, the Son of God. “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col. 2:9).”

Not only for the tribes of Israel. Those far off have heard the preaching of peace...

Ephesians 2:18–22 “For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. [19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (ESV)

Jesus as the tabernacle making us the temple, the dwelling place for God. Think of how profound this truth is. The glory, the majesty, the power of his presence, in you.

And those that camp with him?

Revelation 7:15–17 “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. [16] They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. [17] For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (ESV)

Proximity is presence and Jesus came close to us. For those who believe in him, he moves in.

Those who submit to him as Lord, as King, whose work was sufficient to cover our sin and disregard of God. Sufficient to give us life in him.

1 Corinthians 3:16 “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (ESV)

1 Corinthians 6:19 “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,” (ESV)

Israel looked up to see the presence... and we too need to be reminded to look up - to see the proximity, notice who dwells in us, and live from it. That we are kept, no longer facing wrath, invited all the more into the presence of God for the journey of life.

To have Jesus as our undeniable center.

This then is how we travel.

Seeking the Center

Our journey through life is lived following Jesus. Seeing him, recognizing where he is going and moving there.

And he moves us, transforms us, as we go deeper into his grace toward us. Obedience is no longer a way of earning a place but a response to the place we have been given. He did not love us because we were lovely, but to make us lovely.

And that changes everything. This center is safe, we can come [he doesn't make us take our shoes off and doesn't care what we've stepped in]

We live recognizing that we have wasted enough time looking to other things than Christ for our sense of acceptability, joy, significance, hope and security. We have wasted time adoring and serving other things and we now surrender to Jesus and look only to him.

Capture all the flags because all I need is Jesus! And he can never be taken from me.

Jesus is the center not because we have propped him up or even placed him there in our striving but because he is the creator and sustainer of the universe and his Spirit has brought life to our hearts so we can see and believe.

Truth is the center doesn't leave us the same.

Those in the camp in the wilderness will not be left the same. The experience of God's presence will change them - good and bad.

Good news of Jesus, the gospel doesn't leave us the same.

“The gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking, and our approaches to absolutely everything. The gospel is the blazing center, the brilliant sun whose

light reaches the furthest hinterlands of human existence with its transformative power.” Tim Keller

So we live seeking... going further up and further into his grace. Where striving ceases, where we have an undeniable center. And undeniable peace. Undeniable purpose to make him known.

Disciplines. His word. Community. Communion. Prayer. And worship.

“Worship, the enjoyment of who God is and his favor toward us in Christ, is to be what we seek above all things. It is the one thing that is truly distinctive about us as God’s people. If the church does not provide political commentary and social action, others may step into the gap. But if the church doesn’t worship God, no one else will give him the glory he deserves.”

Rain and drought. *“Scientists say the downpour is still not enough to reverse the regions severe drought...”*

“What a drought-afflicted soul most needs is not a single event, not even a spiritual downpour, but the routine rains of grace—spiritual practices, ordinary means of communing with Christ and his saints—that gradually re-irrigate the water table of the soul.” Duke Kwon

We will take a good drenching now and again, but we need the regular flow of his peace and power.

So we journey onward, prioritizing the things that give a clear view of our Jesus, lifting our voices to him, seeking the center.

On the way to somewhere!

Revelation 21:1–7 “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.”

[5] And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

[6] And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. [7] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” (ESV)

This wilderness story is an invitation to re-center our lives and see Jesus. Everyday.

Bolstered for what we face. Experiencing joy as a slow burn of peace... with occasional flare ups!

No longer protecting lesser “flags” but living under the banner that declares “it is finished!”

Where are you going to camp?

Tired of coming up short? Running after idols, lesser things when your heart is looking for proximity to your Creator?

Ask Jesus to tabernacle in you, to take up residence, to be your center.

Keep asking.

Live seeking Him in his grace.

[Is my whole life so camped around the presence of God as my King that I can say, “Lord, so long as I have you, there is nothing else that I need. My life is yours to command, for sickness or health, for prosperity or poverty, for useful service or an apparently wasted life, given up for you”?]

Followers of Jesus have Him as the undeniable center of their lives.

May it be so in me. In us.

The Lord is on the move. Jesus is bringing us home. May he be our undeniable center. Now and forevermore...