

Immerse Day 53 :: April 14

Today we get one of my favorite sections of the book of Numbers (though believe it or not, there are many). For today we learn about the Nazarite vow.

These voluntary vows mean a great deal to me because they are ways to worship God and to sacrifice for Him that are not law. When someone forces me to do something, doing it becomes about me, not about them. But when I can offer something voluntarily, it becomes about them. This applies to a Lenten fast where we give up something (this year it was chocolate) as a way to worship God. It applies to church attendance (unless you've been brought up to see attendance as mandatory), and service (especially when nobody is looking) and a host of other voluntary activities that are part of our faith.

The Nazarite vow was special because it was such an obvious one. The outward symbol of the Nazarite is their unshaven head. For the duration of the vow, they did not cut any of their hair. It was equally canceling to allow your hair to be cut. And this brings us to one of my most loathed bible characters. Have you guessed who yet? Uncut hair? Yup, I'm talking about the last judge of the book of Judges, hero to Sunday school children everywhere, Samson.

What? How could you speak so cruelly of such a wonderful, superhuman bible hero as Samson? Well, it's mostly because I've read this section of Numbers before, and I've read Samson's actual story. That's more than enough to label this guy, "The Big Jerk".

Samson is dedicated to God as a Nazarite while still in his mother's womb (Judges 13:7), unusual for anyone since the vow cannot be truly his. However, he is raised to be a Nazarite and lives this way, until He doesn't. Read Samson's story and you'll find that as an adult he completely disregards the three things that make a Nazarite, well, a Nazarite. Rather than retell the whole story (Judges 13-16), I'm just going to give the verse that corresponds with Samson's breaking of the rules.

For a Nazarite, rule #1 is No Drinking! Nothing from grapes at all: no juice, wine, raisins, etc. But check out Judges 14:10, where a feast like this included a week's worth of wine.

Rule #2 is Never Touch a Corpse. Don't even go near anything dead. Check out Judges 14:9, where not only does he touch a dead lion (which he had first killed) but eats honey that he scooped out of the carcass, and then feeds it to his parents, making them unclean too! (Um, yuck.)

Rule #3 is Never Cut Your Hair. Is there a more famous moment than when Samson allows Delilah to have his hair cut? Check out Judges 16:17 and remember that Delilah didn't turn him away from God; he had done that over and over again himself.

And so, with his final Nazarite vow broken, Samson loses the blessing of God, epitomized in his unusual strength. Captured, blinded, and placed on display, Samson turns back to God, allowing his hair to grow again, a symbol that the Nazarite has retaken his vow, this time by his own volition.

And so we find Samson not heroic, nor godly, nor particularly holy, but blessed nonetheless. I like this story because it gives me hope, for myself and so many others. But it certainly shouldn't be part of our children's stories. The Nazarite vow is little known, and the fact that this is the only real example we have of it – and such a bad example it is! – is too bad. What an act of worship if someone today were to take the Nazarite vow seriously, unlike Samson. The Big Jerk.