

LIVING FREE - Week 3

Monday, June 21

As we continue in our Living Free series this week, we learned yesterday in worship the way the Lord asked Aaron to place the Lord's blessing upon the people. This reveals to us God's default position or disposition regarding his people. John Gottman has done an amazing amount of research on marriage, observing thousands of couples and the way they interact with each other. He says that couples can have one of two default perspectives of each other. He calls these sentiment overrides. That means there is a sentiment or feeling that overrides the others, a sort of default position with which that person sees his/her spouse. Spouses can have either a negative sentiment override or a positive one toward each other. What does this mean? In positive sentiment override, actions are not seen as negative and are therefore not taken personally or negatively. So, the person's spouse may do something hurtful or thoughtless, but because of the positive sentiment override, it is interpreted as a one-off, or them just having a bad day. But if the spouse has a negative sentiment override, even if the spouse does or says something positive, it will be interpreted as negative. Yes, they did something good, but they only did this to make me feel guilty or to score points in our relationship. This sentiment actually distorts what the spouse did so that everything is perceived as negative. The positive sentiment override means the spouse can hardly do anything wrong, and the negative sentiment override means the spouse cannot do anything right. So, the way you look at your spouse determines how you interpret his/her actions. Now, we might wonder how God views us, and what he thinks of us. In many places in the book of Numbers, we see that God has a positive sentiment override toward his people. This doesn't mean that the people cannot disappoint the Lord, but that he is determined to love them through each episode and chapter. Even his discipline is meant to restore them as a people and to keep them close to him.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 8:1-4

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand." ³ And Aaron did so: he set up its lamps in front of the lampstand, as the LORD commanded Moses. ⁴ And this was the workmanship of the lampstand, hammered work of gold. From its base to its flowers, it was hammered work; according to the pattern that the LORD had shown Moses, so he made the lampstand.

We may find it strange that God gave the high priest Aaron instructions about something as mundane as turning on the lights inside the sanctuary, but these passages reveal the heart of God and the people of God. First, the seven-lamp lampstand that looks like a giant bouquet of flowers. It is the picture of God as the giver of life to his people and to the entire universe. And that light is meant to shine forward as the text tells us. Why forward? Nearby is there is another piece of furniture called the table of the presence. On the table are twelve loaves of bread to represent the people of God before the face of God at all times. The bread was refreshed regularly, and the old bread given to the Levites to enjoy. The loaves were stacked in two piles on the table, and the table was made of solid gold. The light of the lamp shined upon this table at all times, yes, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. What does this mean? Here is one of those symbols of positive sentiment override from God. His light, the light of life, was always shining upon the people. It was a statement of the Lord's favor and that the Lord was always giving life to his people. It is a beautiful picture of blessing, the sign of the Lord's love and favor. Now, let's go back to Gottman for a moment. Remember what he discovered about couples that had a positive sentiment override. Gottman says that being in this state includes admiration and affection, fondness and love. It requires a deep emotional connection. This is what the Lord has with his people. He loves Israel with an everlasting love. Indeed, it is depicted by the light of life, the light of God always shining on his people. This is what God wants his people to know. He is for them. They are his. They are secure in him. Yes, he may discipline them to train them or to correct them, but he will never leave or forsake them. This is what we have in Jesus, a love that never fails and a security that can never fade.

Let's pray:

Lord God, teach us your way of love that we might love as you do in our relationships. Thank you for caring for us, whether we shine or fall, whether we fail or achieve. You are always faithful, and we trust in you. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, June 22

Ok. The Lord had a serious problem. How can you communicate with hundreds of thousands of people at the same time? Israel had no sound system. The time in the wilderness was thousands of years before computer technology, before cellphones or texting. But God needed to call forth the people and direct them to move in order of their tribes. There were times when he wanted to call them to battle, and other times when the Lord wanted to call his people together for a festival. How did he do this?

Here's our text today from Numbers 10:

Number 10:1-7

The LORD said to Moses: ²“Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out. ³When both are sounded, the whole community is to assemble before you at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ⁴If only one is sounded, the leaders—the heads of the clans of Israel—are to assemble before you. ⁵When a trumpet blast is sounded, the tribes camping on the east are to set out. ⁶At the sounding of a second blast, the camps on the south are to set out. The blast will be the signal for setting out. ⁷To gather the assembly, blow the trumpets, but not with the signal for setting out.

God asked Moses to have silver trumpets made to be used to signal the people. There would be two of them, and they would use a variety of sounds to send signals to the people. Growing up my father was involved in Amateur Radio. He was what is affectionately called a “ham”. As a young boy, he learned to repair radios and later completed a degree in electrical engineering. He and his father and brother all became licensed radio operators. My dad put his radio station in my bedroom so I had the privilege of watching him work. He would use his radio to speak with people all over the world, from Russia and China to his own father living in Virginia. It was fascinating to see how it all worked. Now, many times he would not be communicating using voice, but with morse code, a series of dots and dashes sent over the radio wave to send a message. Just with two simple sounds, one a short “dit” and the other, a longer “dah”, any message could be communicated and understood. In a way, this is how the two silver trumpets worked. Having two meant that sounds could be combined or mixed to create different messages. Think of how simple and rudimentary this is. But it was very effective, and the Lord knows his people need to be gathered and also sent out. Now, these two silver trumpets were straight, about 18 inches in length. They could be played in different tones based on the way lips vibrate under pressure. Think of the times when this would be critical. If the people were under attack, they could be assembled to protect one another. At times of national remembrance, the people could be gathered to celebrate together. Now, as we talk about this today, it may seem mundane, but think about how much we as people need to be gathered and united. We are lacking a singular message in the land to call us together. We are divided into factions, and there is no source of unity, no means of gathering us, no unifying message. This is an immense national problem. I remember my father telling us what happened the day after Pearl Harbor. Thousands of people showed up, answering the call to protect the nation. It was a call everyone seemed to hear, and many responded. To be at war was a horrible tragedy, but that moment of need revealed a national unity that had not been seen for decades. That is a deeper question: what does it take to unify a people? The tribes of Israel might have gone their separate direction, and later in Israel's history the nation did split apart. How is it possible to hold people together and produce true unity? In the world, there are basically three major ways for people to cohere. First, it can be done by force. This is what Pharaoh did in Egypt, and many other nations like Rome were able to do. Pharaoh could hold a people together with power and might. The weak could not resist, and they had no hope of rebellion because they were powerless. A second way is that you can pay people to get along. Businesses have learned the way to accomplish this, and some countries buy loyalty with handouts. But Israel had neither might nor money. And, this is not God's way. The third way is through covenant agreements. God entered into covenant with his

people, bringing them together on the basis of promise. This country, the United States, came about by common agreement, a covenant of the people, by the people and for the people. It was not and is not a perfect union or a perfect covenant, but indeed, it reflects this third way. This means that the country will likely hang together as long as there is an awareness of, and a living in, that covenant. We find the covenant reflected in the founding documents of the nation. Now, this is helpful for us because we stand in the new covenant made by Jesus in his blood when he gave his life for us at the cross. It is this sacred divine promise that binds us to the Lord himself and also to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have a better message than the silver trumpets today. We have the word of God given to us, through which he instructs us and leads us toward the fullness of life in his kingdom.

Let's pray:

Sovereign God, we know that all power rests in your hands. You created us and all things, but you have come to us in covenant love. Your love is based upon your promise to your people in Jesus, to redeem us and to include us in your kingdom. Give us, we pray, a renewed sense of life in your kingdom under your Lordship and in your care. For we pray in your name. Amen.

Wednesday, June 23

Ok, as we have learned, Israel had the Lord's presence to guide them in the wilderness. The Lord provided a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God couldn't make his presence or direction clearer to his people.

But along the way, here's what Moses did:

Numbers 10:29-32

Now Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel." ³⁰ He answered, "No, I will not go; I am going back to my own land and my own people." ³¹ But Moses said, "Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes. ³² If you come with us, we will share with you whatever good things the LORD gives us."

This move of Moses surprised us. The Lord promised to direct his people while they were in the wilderness. The Lord brought them out of Egyptian slavery, and the Lord fought for his people when Pharaoh's army showed up. But here's what happened. Moses' brother-in-law from Midian came to visit, and Moses begged him to stay with him on the journey. He asked Hobab to be his eyes and help him to know where Israel should camp out as they passed through Midian. Doesn't this seem strange to you? If you have the Lord guiding you, why do you need the help of someone else? It is true that the heroes of the great stories usually have someone to guide them, someone to teach them the ropes and prepare for what is coming. For example, Luke Skywalker had Obi Wan Kenobi and Yoda to teach him how to use the force. There are many other examples. Katniss Everdeen, of the Hunger Games stories, has Haymitch Abernathy to coach her to succeed in the competition, given he won the games representing the same district as she did. Likely, Moses felt insecure trying to lead the people into a new unknown land. In truth, mentoring makes it more likely that we can thrive in our calling. Moses feels the need for a human mentor, someone he can speak with, even though he could and did speak with the Lord. This presents us with an important question: how can we benefit from the counsel of God and the guidance of others we respect? I believe Moses would say that the Lord provided Hobab to assist him as he needed counsel and support. He understands that the Lord is working through all of the details of this experience. It is not a coincidence that Hobab shows up to visit Moses and the family. Moses seizes the opportunity to get counsel from someone that knows the lay of the land far better than Moses does. This isn't a betrayal of the Lord, but the recognition that God is working in many ways to bring Moses the support he needs to lead the people at this time. Do we perceive the Lord working in this way? We pray for God to heal us, but do we see the provision of a gifted physician as God's gift to take care of us? Most often this is the way that the Lord works in our lives. We would like the miraculous to be provided at every turn, but God specializes in using the common to bring about his purposes and to provide what we need. We see this in Christ. Jesus steps into our world a common man, a poor carpenter. Scripture says that there was nothing in

his appearance that would draw us to him. The Jews were looking for the miraculous, and so they did not recognize Jesus as the messiah. These scenes from the life of Moses call for a revision in the way we see God working in our lives and in the world. This is a way of saying that God is sovereign, and he is always aligning people and circumstances to fulfill his purposes in the world. He uses the common things of our world to accomplish his purposes. God isn't looking for heroes to join his cause. It is astounding what God can do through a group of ordinary people that are devoted to him. The disciples of Jesus demonstrate this truth. There was nothing to set them apart from other men. They were common people, some of them were fishermen. But God worked through them to bring change to the world. Indeed, by the power of the Spirit of God, they turned the world upside down. This also means that he works through you and me as well. We may discount our ability to make a difference, but this is the way the Lord works so that he can reveal his glory.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we look for the dramatic, and every day you are bringing your kingdom through ordinary people and through simple acts of love and service. Give me eyes to see you at work in the world and also in me. Help me to see the simple ways I can serve you today. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Thursday, June 24

Have you ever seen a large project, perhaps even a multi-year project to completion? If you have, likely you learned that the work is sustained by hope. I remember years ago walking a piece of land our little church in New Jersey bought. Actually, the church began in the living room of a home in the community with just a few families. At that time, we had no idea how we would survive or how the church would grow. We had almost nothing, but we did have the sense that God was working in our midst.

Here is our scripture passage for today:

Numbers 10:33-36

So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest. ³⁴ The cloud of the LORD was over them by day when they set out from the camp.

³⁵ Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Rise up, LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." ³⁶ Whenever it came to rest, he said, "Return, LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel."

Now, as the children of Israel got started on their forty-year journey in the wilderness, we find these words of Moses. They are brimming with hope. First, in Moses' encouragement to Hobab as we saw yesterday, he says: "The Lord has promised good to Israel." Good things are coming. If you come along with us you are going to see. All Moses can see is the good news of God's presence. Of course, we know the story, and we know what is coming. The people will complain. There will be evil in the camp. We overhear Moses announce the scattering of the enemies of the Lord, but we remember the spies feared the future and refused to enter into the land. The enemies of the Lord were not exactly scattered. It doesn't seem like the foes of Israel fled before them. Also, listen to the way Moses has numbered Israel. The Hebrew records that Moses says the people are ten thousand thousands. It's a bit of an exaggeration on his part. Is Moses just a huge optimist? Actually, the words of Moses serve to set us up for what the rest of the book reveals. It feels like a set up for a tragedy. What is going on? Moses is living in hope. This is a chief skill of leadership, to envision a positive future and then to enable people to move toward it. Does that future always come? We know the answer to that, not always. These are aspirational goals that Moses has as he thinks about the people and as the Lord is leading them toward the land. Now, there are three major types of goals that help move us forward in life. There are process goals, such as the goal to study two hours each afternoon to prepare for an exam. Studying will help you do well on the exam but will not guarantee success. You have control over these goals. Then there are performance goals, such as the goal to get a 90% or better on the exam. You have some control over these goals but not complete control. Finally, there are outcome goals. You want to get the highest score of anyone in your class. This is very difficult to

control because you cannot control how the other students will perform on the exam. Now, the kind of aspirational goals we hear from Moses are even more difficult. He doesn't know whether Israel will even stand before her enemies. How can he know they will flee? He doesn't know whether the people will flourish in the wilderness and grow in number. That is why these are aspirational goals. He hopes to see this come about, but he cannot control the outcomes. So, why make aspirational goals? They help set the direction and encourage us forward, whether they are met or not. You see, most people do not think that far into the future. They don't envision a distant future much less pursue it with vigor. We like what are called SMART goals. The letter "a" in SMART means attainable. We can do it. We like these kinds of goals; but God's people need aspirational goals as well, goals that we cannot see how we will be able to reach today, but that we can move toward. We can hope in. Goals that always keep us looking to God. Now, as we read the book of Revelation, much of the language of Moses is echoed there in the description of the coming of the kingdom. Yes, the enemies of the Lord are scattered. Yes, there are ten thousand thousands. All those years ago, that little group of people could not have imagined what God would do among them. God gathered a healthy congregation and provided them with land in the community. The congregation invited me to return when the sanctuary was dedicated to praise the Lord for his goodness to us, a goodness in the beginning we could only see from a very great distance. I think this is what Moses could see from the wilderness. God would ultimately do what he promised among his people. Not one promise would fail.

Let's pray:

Faithful and loving Father, you alone can see the future. We cannot. That causes us to fear rather than to hope. That causes us to hold back rather than to move forward. Show us Jesus and the cross, that you might fill us with the assurance we need to step into the future you have planned for us. To the praise of your name. Amen.

Friday, June 25

I hate conflict. Most of us do. But through the years I have learned that conflict is a normal part of life for leaders. Why? To lead is to challenge the status quo. It often means promoting change. For years, I maintained a file of angry letters I received during the first year or two after Sandy and I came to Granada. It was necessary for the church to grow and change for us to minister to the needs around us at the time. This change was often met with resistance. Change seems difficult or impossible. I have experienced this. What we have in the next few chapters of the book of Numbers is a series of crises that Moses faces as a leader of the people that reveals this difficulty.

We are told about the first one here:

Numbers 11:1-3

Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. ²When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the LORD and the fire died down. ³So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the LORD had burned among them.

Perhaps, we think about Moses as the leader of the people, and we should. But there is one greater than Moses, the Lord himself. Here is what happened. When God brought the people out of Egypt, within a year the Lord led them into a place of emptiness. We have learned that the Lord wanted to have the people to himself. They needed to come to know the Lord their God. They needed space and time for that to happen. But the wilderness, the deep desert devoid of life and resources, created an immense fear in the people. To see this desert would cause us great fear as well. Where will we get food and water? How will we survive out here all by ourselves? The response of the people was to complain against Moses and the Lord. It seemed like they were led out of a place rich with resources into the wilderness to die. We are told that the Lord heard their complaining. He caused a fire to burn the edges of their camp. Fire is associated with judgment that comes from the Lord. We might wonder: is God so touchy that he can't take a little complaining? Really, does he have to rain down fire upon them? Now, we are not told that anyone died, but they ended up naming the place "burned." That is what the word

Taberah means. Now, I don't believe God was punishing the people. In the beginning of their journey, the Lord needed to show his people that he was part of them. He was present in the midst of his people. He heard what his people were saying and knew where their hearts were. Here we see that the Lord himself is bringing change to people. We can see sabotage and complaining coming a mile away. But notice what Moses did. He fulfilled the role of the priest, pleading with the Lord on behalf of the people. Moses is afraid, too! He's not afraid of the desert, but he is afraid that the people will turn from the Lord. His fear is well-founded because this is what the people do from the very beginning. The Lord hears Moses' prayer, and the fire dies down and is gone. Now, here's the thing about freedom that we are learning about, and also why change is so difficult. God could bring the people out of slavery, and this is what he did. But the people needed to lay hold of their new freedom. God couldn't do this for them. They needed to change. This is why change remains so difficult for us. Experts talk about two kinds of challenges. One they call a technical challenge. This is a challenge that the leader can provide a solution to. This was the challenge of bringing the people out of slavery. This is the kind of challenge your doctor can give you a pill to take care of. We love these solutions. They seem easy to us, and they are. But then there are what are called adaptive challenges. These are challenges we can only face if we are willing to change. For example, your doctor cannot give you a pill to automatically get you in better physical shape and for you to lose weight. If she could, it would be easy. Instead, these challenges require you to actually change. You will have to develop discipline, change your eating habits, and exercise. Your doctor can solve this problem for you. These are the difficult challenges, the ones that frustrate us, the ones that we run from. This is what Israel was up against in the wilderness. To face the challenge of going into the land, the people had to change. This relates to where we are in Christ. Jesus solves the technical challenge at the cross. He settled the sin issue for us once and for all, bringing us into fellowship with God. He set us free from sin and death. But the living free part is something Jesus cannot do for us. We have to change for this to take place. That is much more difficult. We'd love to have a pill to take care of this, or the silver bullet to make it happen. But that is not God's way. He does have a new abundant life waiting for us, but he can't live it for us. This is why some people claim that the Christian life is impossible. It feels like trying to lose weight when we just cannot do it. Now, of course, God does not leave us alone. In Christ, we are given the Spirit of God. Our spiritual life and growth are in partnership with the Spirit that makes it all possible.

I like the way the apostle Paul explained it:

... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. -Philippians 2:12-13

Yes, this is the living free that God calls us to. We work it out, but God makes it possible. Now as I read the story of Israel in the wilderness, I'd be frustrated looking at them, if I didn't see the same challenges in my life of faith. That's why this journey together will be so important in the days ahead. We'll pick back up here tomorrow.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, indeed, you have set us free. Let us not turn back to bondage, to those things that Jesus freed us from. Use your Holy Spirit to prompt us and lead us to live this new free life. I also pray for my brothers and sisters in Christ as you are bringing life change to each of us. Show us how we can support and encourage each other daily. In your name. Amen.

Saturday, June 26

Yesterday, we began learning about technical challenges as opposed to adaptive challenges. We learned that technical challenges can be solved by leaders with a remedy. For example, governmental leaders can reduce tax rates to allow families to keep more of the money they earn. That is a technical solution for families that find it difficult to get by. But the truth is, unless those families learn spending discipline, the help provided likely won't make a difference. You see, the family has to change. They have to exercise more discipline over their spending. The government might also provide training on budgeting and managing money, but the truth is that families need to change their spending and saving habits. Those are things leaders can't do for

them. They must learn, grow, and change. Here's the thing. Our most difficult changes require us to adapt. In a sense, we are the problem. In a sense, this is what Moses stresses out about.

Listen to his speech to the Lord:

Numbers 11:10-15

¹⁰ Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents.

The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. ¹¹ He asked the LORD, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³ Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."

First, you've got to love the drama of Moses. If this is what leading your people is going to be like, Lord, just take my life. End it. That would be easier. But notice that he feels he must carry the people. It is his responsibility to keep them happy. Moses' grief arose from yet another round of complaining. The people refuse to trust the Lord. Moses feels like he must take care of their problem, but he can't. First, it is too much for him to provide the food they crave. But it is also because they are facing an adaptive challenge. The people must change. Often leaders feel the pressure to promise what they cannot bring about. They feel the burden for things they cannot change, the moment in history in which they are living, the place they find themselves, and the very people they desire to serve. You can see why Moses is overwhelmed and burned out. He can't cause the people to be content with what they have. He cannot force them to trust the Lord and to rest in his provision and power. I remember, during early days in ministry, longing for outcomes I could not produce and results beyond my control. I remember taking a long walk and bringing my complaint to God. I felt maybe God made a mistake placing me where he did, or giving me leadership when he did. I poured out my heart to the Lord. The result was that God removed a burden from me that was never mine to carry and gave me a peace that could only come from him. I think that is what the Lord does here with Moses. It is something that each of us needs. Parents need this when they take too much of a burden on themselves for their children. Yes, you can raise them well and teach them, but soon they are making their own choices. These are choices you cannot make for them. It feels very frustrating to see them make mistakes, to choose what will hurt them. We'd like to make sure that doesn't happen because we love them, and we want the best for them. But we can't. We run up against these limits to our power and leadership in every sphere of our lives. How are we to respond? Like Moses, we can and should take our frustrations to the Lord. Moses can't fix the problem because the people are the problem. But he can take the problem to the one that can work in them. He can take it to God. This is one of the most important responsibilities we undertake as parents or spouses or leaders. We must know where our control ends. We must be able to go to God. Maybe we go as Moses did, in exhaustion and frustration. If that is where you find yourself, that is what you need to do. I have done this more times than I can count, not as dramatically as Moses did. That, I think, is what it means to be a parent, a boss, a leader, and a pastor. Really, I am seeing more and more, that to have such a calling means prayer, and more of it.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we are tempted to think we can make life happen. Remind us that life comes only from you. We want to see life flow in the lives of people we love. We call upon you to act. We trust you to act. Hear our cry to you. Provide us with peace because we trust in you and your steadfast love. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.