

LIVING FREE - Week 9

Monday, August 2

Recently, I did a little science project with my grandson, Ben. We had a small kit we could use to make a vacuum chamber. A vacuum chamber is a container that you can draw the air out of, leaving a void, a vacuum. We easily assembled all the pieces and then began to draw the air out of the chamber. The first, little experiment involves putting a bell inside the chamber. Here's the amazing thing my grandson discovered. If you ring the bell inside the chamber, it makes no sound. This is because sound waves need something to travel through to reach our ears. Now, of course, to a six-year-old, this was surprising. It seemed to defy the laws that govern our world. But instead, it is actually the way our world works, the way God made it.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 19:1-3

Now the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ²“This is the statute of the law that the LORD has commanded: Tell the people of Israel to bring you a red heifer without defect, in which there is no blemish, and on which a yoke has never come. ³And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be taken outside the camp and slaughtered before him.

Now, this part of the book of Numbers is even more strange than the vacuum chamber, but it reveals some of the deep ways that God has made our world and also something about who God is. This law and the ceremony of the red heifer was given to cleanse people that touch a dead body. This law was so strange that the rabbis to this day disagree what it means and why God commanded it. Let's see for ourselves. First, the reason this is important to the Lord is that the Lord is the Lord of life. God is the author of life not death. Death came into the world because of sin. Therefore, death was to be kept far away from God's presence in the tent of meeting and away from his people. But if someone died, someone would have to handle the body and prepare it for burial. This meant God's own people would encounter death. As a result, the person would become tainted or unclean. So, God provided a special way to cleanse death from a person. He commanded the people to take a red heifer, a sign of strength and life, and kill and burn it completely. But, why did the heifer have to be red? Again, blood red is a life symbol. So, in the killing of the red heifer, there was the admission of death, a strong animal, one never used for domestic purposes. But then we are told the ashes would be put into water, water that became living water. Here is death issuing forth in life. Now, the Lord gave special instructions about where the animal was to be killed, where the ashes were to be kept, and how cleaning would take place. God reveals, in the details, the importance of life and the need to blot out the effects of death. Now, of course, we know that ashes sprinkled in water cannot remove from us the power of death. God was giving this law as a sign. This is one reason why the book of Numbers is so important for us to understand. Here are the signs of life that God has given to us to help prepare us for the messiah, our savior. Here's why the red heifer is so important and how Jesus saves us. Scripture tells us that we sin because of the fear of death. Our sins result from a life-strategy that is bound to fail. We can do nothing to avert our death. This reality grasps our hearts and becomes one of the chief motivations in our lives, keeping us bound to death rather than enjoying the life God has given to us.

Here is Hebrews, telling us what Jesus has done:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. -Hebrews 2:14-15

That is a mouthful. In short, the red heifer ceremony might remove the uncleanness of having touched a dead body, but God planned in Jesus the death of death itself. By entering death and taking death on himself, he has removed the power of death to control us. Yes, the God that kept death far away from him, entered death on our behalf to give us life. Yes, this is what Jesus is talking about when he says that when we trust in him, we find in him living water, a cleansing that issues forth with eternal life for his people. Yes, death is real, and the evil one would use it to

keep us in bondage to fear. But Jesus has come and conquered death for us. He has opened a new and living way through his blood.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we know about death. It fills our world, and sometimes we doubt that there is eternal life. But we know Jesus was raised to life, and he has given life to all that trust in him. Help us this day to live in the light of his resurrection. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, August 3

Today, I am with my family in North Carolina, high in the mountains. Our family has had a home here for generations now. It is always cool here because of elevation, and the site is beautiful. But there is one major drawback. At this height, water is extremely scarce. The house is supplied with water by a well on the property that is almost five hundred feet deep. Even then, we must be very careful to conserve water while we are here. Water is a major problem across the world; as populations grow in the world's great cities, water supplies are strained. At this moment in the southwest United States, there is an immense water crisis. Israel experienced this problem throughout their years in the wilderness. There were a number of significant oases that provided resources for the Lord's people, but with as many people on the move as they had, the problem persisted.

Here's our text for today:

Numbers 20:1-5

And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there. ² Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. ³ And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? ⁵ And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink."

Now, this scene begins with the death of Miriam. I don't think it is a coincidence that the people find no water to drink at this time. Here, physical thirst and dryness reflects an even deeper spiritual dryness. It is amazing how scripture announces this immense loss. Miriam had been a leader among the women, and she had been largely responsible for saving Moses when he was a baby. As a young woman, she knew the Lord, and God gave her a deep understanding of his ways. Her presence provided stability for her family and her people, and now she was gone. Her death also signaled the passing of a generation. There are many lessons here for us. First, we know that our time is limited. Even the most important leaders in the community only serve for a season. The faith is always being passed from generation to generation. No one person has the place of leadership for long. This is good for us because it reminds us that God alone sustains us from generation to generation. We must be careful not to put leaders on pedestals or to give to them honor that belongs only to the Lord. Also, each generation needs to be ready to do their part to carry the faith forward, always learning and growing in the knowledge of God as the gospel is applied to each unique moment in history. God has given us our moment to serve and lead as well. Have you found your place to serve? Do you see that you have an important place in carrying the faith during your generation? Here is a second lesson. This time brings a season of dryness for Israel. All of us go through dry seasons spiritually. This is not because we have failed or because God has failed us in any way. These times are part of life for us. I have had dry times all along my experience walking through Christ. Some have lasted for a few weeks, others for as long as a year. The point, when these times come, is to continue seeking and following Christ, because we know that times of refreshment will come. Yes, they will come. God will cause water to flow. We can trust that this is true for each of us. Sadly, at this point, Israel seems to regress in their faith and return to old complaints they uttered long before. We have to be careful that dryness does not drive us to disbelief or to wandering away from God. We have to know that God uses these seasons to deepen our trust and to encourage us to draw near to him. Yes, with the death of Miriam, the people all experienced this dryness, literally and spiritually. But what would

they do with this time? Would they blame God and claim that he doesn't care for them? Or would they rest in God and trust that he will provide for them? Of course, Israel often shows us the worst response that becomes something of a warning for us. One of the powerful scenes of the cross took place when Jesus became thirsty. Imagine what he went through. After a long night of trials and a beating that brought Jesus near death, he is lifted on the cross. At one point, he simply said: I thirst. Here was son of God, he himself is living water, the source of life, finding himself dry and parched. He cries out for water, but has no relief. Jesus went to this place on our behalf so that we might know the refreshment of God, so that we might know that the Lord will bring us water from the rock. God will bring times of refreshment to us. He will sustain us with living water, life that comes from Jesus.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we know what it feels like to be dry. We understand Jesus when he says, "I thirst." Thank you that we can trust times of refreshment will come. Thank you that as we thirst, Jesus comes with living water, welling up to eternal life in us. Help us today to trust in you during times of longing and dryness. We draw close to you Lord, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, August 4

Recently while retelling a story about my dad, I found myself tearing up with emotion. At the time, I was surprised. The emotion caught me off guard. Yes, my dad passed away just a few months ago, and my emotions are still close to the surface. It also revealed to me the need to process all that has happened in the last year. You see, our emotional life exerts a deep influence over us and how we process life from day to day. We may not see it, but it is always there. Now, here is what happened to Moses and Aaron in the wake of the death of their sister Miriam. The congregation of Israel lacked water and began to grumble and complain. How would Moses and Aaron process this while already in emotional distress?

We'll see from our text for today:

Numbers 20:6-11

Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, ⁷ and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸ "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle."⁹ And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. ¹⁰ Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.

Now, this scene is central to the story of Moses because, as a result of the way Moses conducted himself, the Lord does not allow Moses to enter into the land of promise. We will see why the Lord does this; but for today, we need to think about processing emotions. First, we need to understand that our emotions are not our enemies. There are times when they arise and seem to run the show, keeping us from wise decisions or pushing us in directions we do not want to go. But our emotions can be very helpful to us, indeed, they are a gift of God to reveal where our hearts are. You need to know how your heart is processing your life experience because, as the book of Proverbs tells us, your heart is the wellspring of your life. You could say that your heart is the control system of your life. Your heart provides the motivational structure of your life, essentially why you do what you do. Here, if we want to understand what Moses does in this moment, we would need to know his heart, what is motivating him. Clearly, he is acting out of grief and frustration, sadness over the loss of his sister, and weariness over the complaining of the people. In a way, he acts out of character for what we have come to expect of Moses. Yet, our emotions are not the enemy, and they reveal what is going on in our hearts. Now, this is not the message we often receive. We are sometimes told not to trust our emotions, not to follow our emotions, and perhaps, even to deny our emotions. But our emotions are the bread trail revealing to us where our hearts are. Instead, we need to be able to listen to our emotions and respond based on the gospel, the awareness that God loves us and is for us. So, that is the second thing.

Listening and learning from our emotions. How can we do this? Many of us are not attentive to our emotions but only experience them when they come. As a result, they can catch us off guard. This can happen so quickly that we might want to say, "Watch out, here it comes..." Instead, we want to learn by experience to recognize our emotions. When I was a kid, my parents gave me a metal detector. I could use it at the beach to find metal objects. At first, the detector made a beeping sound to indicate there was metal beneath the ground. I didn't know what the metal object was. So, I put down the detector and began to dig, sifting through the sand to find what had set off the detector. In a way, this is what we do. At first, we may not know what we are feeling and why. But we spend a little time digging beneath the surface and find out what is going on in our hearts. What was it that caused me to become angry? Why did this make me afraid? You get the idea. Soon, you learn to better detect what is going on in your heart. It can help to have a friend or counselor help you along the way. Now, as we read about Moses, it seems that he was simply acting on his emotion. He wasn't aware of how deeply his loss was driving his actions. Now, the good news for us in Christ is that we come to accept our emotional experience. It's okay to feel and feel deeply. We don't suppress our emotions because we know that Christ has accepted us fully. Instead, we come to learn more about our hearts through our emotional experience, so that our hearts may be conformed to the image of Christ. We come to bring our hearts before the Spirit of God, the counselor that teaches us and leads us.

Let us pray:

Faithful and gracious God, thank you for your steadfast love in Christ. Thank you that we can bring our hearts to you, and that you care for us. We rely on your Holy Spirit as our counselor, teacher, and helper. Provide us with your peace in the storm, your counsel in perplexity, and your joy in all things. We praise you for your goodness and your patience. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, August 5

Today, we diagnose the scene of Moses striking the rock. Here's what has happened up to this point. First, Moses' sister Miriam died. She had been the strength of her family when she was a young woman, and had accompanied Moses throughout their time in the wilderness. She provided leadership to the women of Israel, offering Moses immense support. Second, there was a lack of water. This was a sign that life was drying up, a sign that accompanied Miriam's death. Finally, the people turned to bitter complaining. They seemed to regress in their faith. By the way, this is the new generation born in the wilderness, a generation that had not known slavery or hard labor, a people that needed to grow in faith and trust in God.

This is where our text picks up:

Numbers 20:10-13

¹⁰ Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. ¹² And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." ¹³ These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy.

Now, because Moses is the most important figure among the Jewish people, the Rabbi's debated what Moses did here ad infinitum. The rabbis offered over forty plausible reasons the Lord did not allow Moses to go into the land. Often, they try to clear Moses of doing any wrong. It is true that Moses is a man of God, but he was not the Lord's messiah. There are times his leadership fails, times he does wrong. What happens here? First, he becomes the accuser of his own people. He calls them "you rebels." Of course, this is true. The people have rebelled against the Lord, but it is Moses' calling to defend the people and to represent them before the Lord. This is out of character for Moses. It reveals that his grief and frustration has caused him to lose sight of his calling. Second, he makes it sound as if he and Aaron are bringing forth water for them. Perhaps this reveals the burden he feels in having to lead the people and deal with yet another complaint. But in the process, he breaks faith with the Lord. There is no mention of the Lord at all. As the

Lord says to Moses, “You did not uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people.” Finally, it really is a slight against God that he does not honor the Lord at this time. Instead, Moses makes this moment about himself and his frustrations. He has forgotten his calling. He is to stand before the Lord and represent the people, stand before the people and represent the Lord. He has lost his patience with the people. In truth, he has shown that he is not the one to lead the people for the next chapter of their journey with the Lord. It is true with all of us, Moses included, that there are seasons of life, and the season for the leadership of Moses is passing. God will raise up another leader to lead the people going forward. As always, there is so much to learn here. One major lesson is that there are seasons in our lives as well. A place of leadership that may be a good fit for us today, may not be tomorrow. Also, it is helpful to see that we may begin projects that will need to be completed by someone else. The most important of our projects may unfold this way. Just as Moses started a work that Joshua would bring to completion, the most important work you do may be completed by the person that follows you. Because we believe the work belongs to the Lord, and we belong to the Lord, we must be okay with this. We do not see Moses offering a complaint to the Lord at this time. It is difficult to imagine that he does not feel disappointed. He has led the people so far. But this is the way God works in our world. The most significant of our projects will require more than one generation to complete. Jesus alone can say at the end of his ministry, that the work is indeed finished.

Let’s pray:

Lord God, we tend to have such a small view of things. We think in terms of our times, yet you are the Lord of the generations, completing your work across hundreds of years. Help us to trust in your ways and to daily offer ourselves as your servants. Thank you for your faithful love. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Friday, August 6

North Carolina is the place where both my parents were born, one in Charlotte and the other in a small town in the eastern part of the state. Whenever I am in North Carolina, I bump into people that are my relatives either through marriage or through blood. Every few years, my dad’s side of the family would come together for a family reunion. These were large affairs held at the original family farm. On the farm was a family cemetery that held the key to much of our family’s history. You could see the names of the generations etched in stone. In the last twenty years or so, the family has held no reunions, and so I know very little about the most recent generations. Sadly, many family members have drifted apart. This is what happened to Israel.

Here’s our text for today:

Numbers 20:14-21

Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardship that we have met: ¹⁵how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers. ¹⁶And when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. ¹⁷Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the King’s Highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.” ¹⁸But Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you.” ¹⁹And the people of Israel said to him, “We will go up by the highway, and if we drink of your water, I and my livestock, then I will pay for it. Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more.” ²⁰But he said, “You shall not pass through.” And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force. ²¹Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory, so Israel turned away from him.

Now, here’s what happened and why. This meeting of Israel with the people of Edom could have been a family reunion. It might have been a time when people related to one another and joined arms. How so? Edom is the name of the people that came from Esau, the brother of Jacob. Do you remember the story of Jacob stealing the birthright of his brother Esau? As a result of Jacob’s treachery, he had to flee for his life. Esau was ready to take his life. They did not see each other for many years. Indeed, by then, both of them were married and had large families of their own.

The Lord blessed each of them, even though Isaac gave his blessing only to Jacob. Their first reunion was a tense moment when it looked like there might be violence. But the brothers made peace even though they chose to go different directions. Hundreds of years then pass before this meeting of the brothers again through their ancestors. At this point in time, Edom could assist Israel as they prepare to enter into the land. Why do they not? There are a number of reasons. Just as Jacob and Esau competed for place in their family, now Edom sees how large Israel has become, and they see Israel as a threat to their own national security. They don't see Israel as their own family, but as people that could take their land. Gone are the affections of kinship, replaced instead by the struggle for survival and place in the world. It is at its heart, the fear of scarcity. This is the idea that there won't be enough, enough land, enough resources, enough food or water, for both of them to thrive. Perhaps, Edom fears that Israel will not keep its word, that they will stay in the land and not pass through as promised. Edom says "no" to helping their brothers at a pivotal time of need. Instead of making an ally, they make a new adversary. These moments call into question how we view our world. Are resources scarce, leaving us in the place where we must battle for position and hoard what we can? Or, is this a world with enough to be shared? How you answer this question may become a major shaping force in your life. Mother Teresa once said, sadly we have forgotten that as human beings we belong to each other. This has resulted in this competition for resources that continues to this day, and an unwillingness to share what God has provided to us. It is through the gospel, the love of God for us in Christ, that we can learn a love that reaches to our family and extends to our human family. Jesus said, why do you worry about your life, what you will eat and what you will wear? He warned that worrying could not add a single hour to our lives.

Let's pray:

Lord God, our heavenly Father, we worry about what we will eat, where we will live, and how we will make ends meet. We live in a world of competition not cooperation. Teach us that true freedom does not come when we think we have enough, but when we can rest completely in you and be content with what you provide to us. Thank you for caring for us and for being our gracious and loving Father. For we pray in your name. Amen.

Saturday, August 7

After my pastor and mentor passed away, the men he had mentored all came together for his memorial service. There were six of us invited to say a few words at the celebration of life. Our tears mingled with laughter as we remembered this extraordinary man and his influence in our lives. He had been our consummate encourager. How did he do this? First, he tracked with us. I remember many years after moving away from Miami, I would receive phone calls from him. He was checking in to see how I was doing. He was a busy man, but he was thinking of me. He followed me through each chapter of training and then into ministry. Second, he spoke truth that I needed to hear when I needed to hear it. His words were usually very positive, but he also spoke a painful word when I needed to hear it. Finally, he could see into the future, and he often encouraged me based on the person he saw me becoming, rather than the man I was at the time.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 20:22-29

²²And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. ²³And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, ²⁴"Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. ²⁵Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor. ²⁶And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there." ²⁷Moses did as the LORD commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. ²⁸And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. ²⁹And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.

Now, as with my mentor when he died, there was a passing of the baton of leadership. The Lord set up a succession plan for Aaron, the high priest. Eleazar was the son of Aaron. Here's the thing. Aaron brought him into a mentorship long before Eleazar assumed the role of high priest, giving him various tasks to carry out to serve the people and to serve the Lord. For example, Aaron assigned him to carry out the ritual of the red heifer, bequeathing a critical responsibility that would not only prepare him for ministry, but also begin to build his stature in the eyes of the people. This moment we read about that took place on Mount Hor was the culmination of years of preparation for Eleazar to take on his new role. Then, Eleazar became the priest the people had during their time of conquest, when they entered in and took possession of the land. I love the way God works to prepare people for their calling, for the places of leadership he sets out for them. Imagine the scene described here when the high priest's garments were removed from Aaron and then placed upon Eleazar. On those garments were stones that represented each of the tribes of Israel. When he entered into the holy of holies, he was there representing all of the people. His clothing was very ornate, filled with the symbolism of the people he served and the God he worshiped. Perhaps, you remember the garment taken from Jesus at his crucifixion. It was the one that was seamless, the one the soldiers gambled over. That was just as the undergarment was that the high priest Aaron and his son Eleazar wore. Jesus was serving as our priest when he went to the cross to make atonement for our sin. You see, we have a priest greater than Aaron or Eleazar. Yes, that is Jesus. He did not bring the blood of bulls or goats. It was his precious blood that was shed for our redemption. Now, let me tell you what happened at the celebration of life for my pastor mentor. They brought out his robe that we might try it on for size. Let me tell you, my mentor was six foot six inches and over three hundred pounds. It fit none of us. Indeed, none of us were like him, yet nonetheless, he passed on so much of what he learned of God's grace to us. That remains with each of us today. Just as Aaron died there on Mount Hor and left the priesthood to us, our mentor died and left ministry in our hands. He prepared us for the coming of that day and for lives of service reaching forth into the future.

Let's pray:

Faithful Father, you have provided us a loving and gracious high priest, Jesus, the one that came for us and died for us. You have called us a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to you. Enable us, by your Spirit, to fulfill the calling you have given us that you might be glorified in all things. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.