

## **LIVING FREE - Week 12**

### **Monday, August 23**

This week we continue our study of the book of Numbers. We begin with a chapter that reveals how people can covenant together and serve each other even when they have differing desires, divergent plans. Fairness is deeply ingrained in us. As children we are tremendously aware of the way our parents treat us. The smallest whiff of unfair treatment gets our attention. As adults, we are no different. I remember a friend telling me how, growing up, it was clear she was not treated like the other children in her household. It wasn't until much later in life she discovered that man she thought was her father actually was not. She was the product of an affair. The man raising her knew the truth. Of course, she did nothing to deserve the mistreatment she received. This was not fair.

Now, here is what happens in our text for today:

Numbers 32:1-5

*Now the people of Reuben and the people of Gad had a very great number of livestock. And they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. <sup>2</sup>So the people of Gad and the people of Reuben came and said to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the chiefs of the congregation, <sup>3</sup>“Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon, <sup>4</sup>the land that the LORD struck down before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.” <sup>5</sup>And they said, “If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan.”*

As the people of Israel were approaching the land, two of the tribes noticed the plot of ground outside the boundaries of the land would be best for them and their people. Why was that? They raised animals and did not till the soil. It turns out that the land of Gilead just east of the Jordan River would be perfect for them and their people. They had no need to go any further. This meant their journey would be over, and they could settle down sooner rather than later. But here was the problem. All of Israel would be needed to take possession of the land. There would be battles to fight and work to be done to build the cities. It would take all of Israel to complete the work. If two tribes settled in Gilead, it would affect the ability of Israel to complete their mission in the land. Yes, the land was perfect for them, but the situation was unhelpful for the rest of Israel. Now, a move like this might seem selfish and disrespectful of the other tribes. So, how was Moses to work this out? Should these tribes be allotted this land? If so, under what conditions?

Now, we often find ourselves in moments like this with others. How do I get along with my neighbors when we do not share the same goals? Moses wants to hold the people together, but remember the issue of fairness. It would just not be fair to let two tribes settle down, while the rest of the nation battles for freedom and a place in the land. Here's the compromise Moses strikes with the two tribes. He allows them to settle down there, but he requires that their men cross the Jordan and stand with the rest of Israel as they take possession of the land. Yes, they may establish a place for their families, but they must commit to support their brothers and sisters in the long conquest that lies ahead. Do you see what Moses and those tribes have done? They have made this a win-win situation. Of course, this requires, of both parties, the ability to work it through, the ability to consider the options. They must listen and talk. They must consider each other's priorities. They must work through compromise to agreement. For this to work, most of all, it requires trust and faithfulness. The two tribes promise to stand with the rest of Israel, and so they must fulfill their promise in the days ahead. Their promise will be costly, but this is the glue that holds people together. Now, imagine what happens when people cannot walk together in this way, when there is no room for compromise, or people cannot be trusted for the promises they make. Such a people cannot have a future together, only a future apart. A nation divided against itself cannot start, Jesus warned.

Now, how do we apply this where we live. First, we must be constantly ready to work with others to find compromise. It takes great effort to stay together. It is pretty easy to separate. Second, trust is critical for relationships to form and remain healthy. As we think about this, think of what

God has done for us in Christ, tearing down the walls that separate us from each other and giving us a place to stand together. It is this gospel that enables us to seek fellowship with others different from ourselves. It is this gospel that answers to our heart cry for fairness. In Christ, what Jesus got was unmistakably unfair, so he might create another basis for our relationships. That basis is sacrifice, my willingness to lose in order that you might win.

Let's pray:

We know the way our world works, Lord. We see it every day. Tit for tat. You get what you deserve. Everything must be earned and deserved. Then we see Jesus and his life of love on our behalf. Help us to learn your way of love, so that we might be faithful to our promises and also be able to bring people together for a future. We pray together in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Tuesday, August 24**

Politicians talk a good game. Promises flow like a mighty river during campaign season. After the election, memory lapses set in. Promises fall away. The river becomes a stream that has run dry. People feel lied to and disappointed. So, we brace ourselves when the time comes ready to be crushed by expectations. Years ago, I sat with a couple ready to be married. It was our last pre-marital counseling session. The couple had explained that neither of them had grown up in intact families. Their fathers took off, leaving them along with mom at home. I remember this couple speaking about hoping for something they had never seen. Long-term faithfulness. How was that going to happen? In their experience it had never happened. How could their story be different?

That leads us to our text for today:

Numbers 32:31-33

*And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben answered, "What the LORD has said to your servants, we will do. <sup>32</sup> We will pass over armed before the LORD into the land of Canaan, and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us beyond the Jordan." <sup>33</sup> And Moses gave to them, to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben and to the half-tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land and its cities with their territories, the cities of the land throughout the country.*

This is the epilogue to the story of the promise made by the two tribes, Reuben and Gad, to fight alongside Israel even though their land would lie to the east of the Jordan River. Here is the beauty of this moment. They did it. They followed through. And, imagine the sacrifice. Once they received their land from Moses, they were home free. They could settle down. But they made a promise to join the defense force of Israel. That would require leaving their families, their children behind to go to war. In itself, this was an immense risk. They left their own loved ones vulnerable. Why did they do it? They promised. Have you ever done something just because you promised? Maybe when you made the promise it seemed like the right thing, but later you realized that following through was going to be more costly than you realized. You could find many reasons to go back on your word. But you gave your word. So, you followed through. You did the hard thing. Yes, it cost you. Indeed, these two tribes entered into a mutually beneficial agreement (as we learned about yesterday) with Israel before the Lord. Still, the cost would be high. They would be separated from their families. They would put their lives and their plans on hold until the fighting was finished and their brothers were settled with their families as well. Years ago, a woman came to me as pastor, asking me to write a note to the US government to plead her case. She had enlisted in the US Army. At the time, there were no active hot spots of US intervention. She couldn't imagine that things would so quickly change. Then a conflict sprang up in the middle east. Her unit was deployed. She came, asking me to ask for her deployment to be postponed or rescinded. I remember asking her, "When you signed up, did you understand you could be deployed?" Indeed, she did. But when the day came, her attitude changed, and she wanted out. She just didn't want to do it. But as I told her, you promised! And, indeed, the army did deploy her.

Now, scripture says we should not make promises unless we count the cost. Indeed, a promise assumes we will follow through. The young couple I met with had it right. They didn't want to take their marriage vows unless they committed to keep those promises in sickness and in health, for

richer, for poorer. At the same time, they wanted to walk with other couples also living a life of promise-keeping, a life of fidelity. This really is a beautiful chapter because we hear the promises, and perhaps we see disappointment coming. In the end, we are pleasantly surprised by the two tribes that make their promise. If they had not followed through, there might have been a civil war. Perhaps, Israel would have forever remained divided over land. That's the reality of our promises. They bind us together, and they help keep us together. Or, the broken promises can damage trust and separate us. Always, the Lord himself is the promise-keeper in our world. The gospel rests on God's promise, a promise fulfilled at great cost. That is how we know where our story is going. God promised. At the end of their pre-marital counseling session, the couple about to be married were left with Jesus. In Christ, they had resources that their parents didn't have. They knew they were loved well by the Lord. That would give them a place to stand, a place to stand together.

Let's pray:

Faithful Father, your love keeps our world spinning. Your promises hold the stars in place. We feel strong, and we so easily make promises. Help us to learn your way of faithfulness as demonstrated to us in Christ. Remind us each day that our hope is in you. For we pray in the name of Jesus our savior. Amen.

### **Wednesday, August 25**

I'm not much for watching TV, and I avoid all but the print news. But over the years, I've gotten into watching travelogues that are available on YouTube. These videos are not professionally produced, so the production value is not great. But you have the feeling of being there on the journey. My favorite one to watch is by a young man from Fort Meyers Beach, Florida. A few years ago, he bought his first sailboat and began venturing out on longer and longer trips. I remember first seeing his video of his single-handed trip from California to Hawaii, on his 24-foot sailboat. This seemed pretty daunting to me, but he made it look easy. This summer he sailed to Bermuda and then across the Atlantic to the Azores. Thankfully, he upgraded his 24-foot boat to a more seaworthy 28-foot boat. Along the way, he shows you the challenges of raising and taking down sails in 30-knot wind, and also cooking dinner for himself while waves are crashing over his boat. I think about Sam, that's his name, when I read our text for today:

Numbers 33:1-6

*These are the stages of the people of Israel, when they went out of the land of Egypt by their companies under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. <sup>2</sup>Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the LORD, and these are their stages according to their starting places. <sup>3</sup>They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month. On the day after the Passover, the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians, <sup>4</sup>while the Egyptians were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had struck down among them. On their gods also the LORD executed judgments. <sup>5</sup>So the people of Israel set out from Rameses and camped at Succoth. <sup>6</sup>And they set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness.*

Now, as we reach this place in the book of Numbers, we are given a listing of the places Israel has stopped on their forty-year journey from Egypt, along their way to the land of promise. Many of these names don't mean anything to us because they are not even mentioned in their travelogue. So, why are we given the list? I think Moses tells us about each stop for many reasons. First, he is showing us the true journey from slavery to freedom. You read the list, and you see that it took a long time. There were many stops along the way. The gifts that God gives us often take years to receive. We come to faith in Christ, but it is over many years that we come to live a free life. It takes years to learn the gospel and to trust the gospel. Our lives are filled with these stops. Here are some of mine: Miami Shores, Kendall, Boiling Springs, North Carolina, Miami, Scotland, Miami, Princeton, New Jersey. Hillsboro, New Jersey. I'll stop there. You get the idea. Each stop was a place of growth and learning that led me to the place I am now. Some stops were for years, others for far shorter periods of time. God was building life in me. He is also doing the same with you. You may want to stop and review the stages in your journey. There are forty-two stops recorded here for the journey of Israel. We know what transpired on a few of

those legs of the journey. It all began just after the Passover in Egypt and ended forty years later, with Israel encamped just outside the land. God delivered them safely, but it was quite a journey. They faced attack from enemies, dealt with thirst and hunger, received the law of God, went through a series of rebellions...you get the idea. Likely, the stages on your way included tests for you as well. Here's the thing. The names of each of these places carried memories of lessons learned. I have vivid and powerful memories of learning lessons from the stops on my journey. That's the second lesson. God is building you a step at a time and an experience at a time. He doesn't pour everything into us at once. Our hearts need time to be trained. There is a process, a journey.

Now, back to Sam, the sailing young man, it has been fun through the last few years to see him progress from a beginning sailor to a young man that can cross the Atlantic by himself in a sailboat. Again, it was a process of learning. As I view the videos he makes along the way, I can see these stages in him. That's the third thing; it is the patience of God. God spoke the worlds into existence, but what he wants with us is that journey. He wants that because that is where we come to know him, how we come to trust him, and the place where we come to enjoy him. Now, as I watch Sam sail, this is my only sadness. He's doing it all alone. Yes, he speaks to us via his GoPro camera, but he has no one there with him to enter in, to enjoy him and the adventure that his life is. As we have said, this is what God wants with you. Now, maybe you have not viewed your own life in this way, as your adventure with God, day by day. It's not too late to begin today. No video camera is needed. What is needed is for you to see that you are living before the face of God. He is already in your life and present with you through each step of your life journey. It is as you begin to share your life with him, you come to enjoy him more and more and also glorify him on the way.

Let's pray:

Faithful and ever-present God, we push through another day, and you are with us. We may hardly pay attention to your presence, but we know you are there. So, today, O Lord, make us aware of your presence. Reveal yourself to us, that we might rejoice in you. For we pray in your name. Amen.

### **Thursday, August 26**

Dear friends of ours at Granada used to spend their summers each year in North Carolina. This was a sweet time to spare them from the summer heat and the hurricanes. But coming home was no fun. With the house closed up for so long, little critters, especially bugs, would find the house vacant and decide to move in. On arriving home, scattered all around the house would be dead palmetto bugs, feet pointed to the sky. These were casualties of the insect bombs they set off when they first left home. It was no fun cleaning up the mess. In the process, they encountered more bugs, those pesky palmetto bugs that all of us hate. Now, when Israel prepared to move into the land of promise that we now call Israel, they also had a clean-up program.

Here is what our text tells us:

Numbers 33:50-53

*And the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, <sup>51</sup> "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, <sup>52</sup> then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. <sup>53</sup> And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it.*

The Lord had long promised this land to his people. They were to drive out the people living there, but notice what else they were to do. No shrines or idols or false gods could be left in the land. This meant pagan temples, images of various kinds, and anything used to worship false gods. Now, we may read this and think that God seems pretty defensive, pretty protective of his people and his relationship with his people. You would be right. The word scripture uses is jealous. God is jealous over his people. But we need to make a careful distinction here. God is not jealous over what is not his. He is protective of what is his. Do you know that not all jealousy

is wrong? Yes, if you are jealous over your spouse and kids, to protect and keep them, this is a good thing. You want to make sure they are safe. You feel determined and vigilant in this. That is good. Jealousy becomes wrong when it is over something that is not yours, when it becomes unhealthy paranoia and fear. Here is why this matters to the Lord. He knows what idols do to us. He knows that they distract us. They enslave us. They cut us off from life. Indeed, later on, this is what happened to his people. They gave their hearts to idols, and then they came to serve them and make sacrifices to them. We can do this as well. If we make an idol of our world, and draw our meaning and significance from there, it will come to own us. We have to keep it going. When it is in danger, we feel threatened and afraid. Soon, we find we are serving it. We have to keep it going. Usually, our idols will require greater and greater sacrifices from us, but in the end, they will not deliver what they promise in any lasting way. Why not? They can't. Their power is based on a lie. It is the lie that they can give us true value and meaning, significance and ultimately life. But they themselves are lifeless. They require us to prop them up and keep them going. So, God said, sweep the land of idols. Get rid of all of them. Sadly, even if we pledge not to serve them, we like to keep them around. They are at hand. We are in danger of serving them. Remember, God is jealous over us with loving care. He wants our hearts free. He is the only one that we can serve that will set us free from slavery. He is unlike the false gods in that serving him brings us life and freedom, not bondage. So, when the people went into the land, God said, "Go on a roach hunt. Clear the land of them." To do this in our lives opens the way to life and joy.

Now, we might ask, how can we know that to follow the Lord is freedom? We see the purposes of God, the love of God, and the grace of God in Jesus. He reveals to us God's good purposes, to give us life and not to take it away. We see Jesus as he comes to serve. He lays down his life for the sake of the ones he loves. That is Israel, and also you and me. The question is, why we would want our idols lying around? Why keep them in our lives, when we have life in Christ? They are tempting. They are attractive. They are readily available, and they promise us life and a future. This is why God knew they needed to go.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we know what it is like to live for other things besides you. We've given our hearts and our service to that which does not satisfy, to that which cannot save us. Forgive us, O Lord, for the times when we turn away from you. Help us to rest in your steadfast love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Friday, August 27**

It is said that Cecil Rhodes, the man that was prime minister of South Africa during years of British rule, was a stickler for dress. He always looked perfect and dressed perfectly as well. But he was even more fine-tuned to the needs of his friends. One night he was holding a great dinner party and was greeting his guests at the door when a friend arrived straight from a very long journey. The man's clothes were disheveled and wrinkled. He simply would not fit into the party. But it seems Rhodes disappeared and returned to his party dressed in wrinkled clothes as well. He wanted to make sure his guest felt comfortable. He was making room for his guest.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 35:1-5

*The LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, "Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in. And you shall give to the Levites pasturelands around the cities. The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and their pasturelands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. <sup>4</sup>The pasturelands of the cities, which you shall give to the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around. <sup>5</sup>And you shall measure, outside the city, on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall belong to them as pastureland for their cities.*

Now, early in this book we learned that the Levites would be unlike the other tribes of Israel. How so? First, the Lord called upon them to provide the service needed to care for the sanctuary. They

would also lead the people in worship. Today, we might call them religious workers. They had a special calling from the Lord, and as such, they would work closely with the Lord himself. As a part of this calling, they would not inherit land as the other tribes did. This made sense because they would be serving the people wherever the Lord was worshiped and wherever people were in need. But this left the Levites out. The good news is that the Lord is the God of details. So, before the people enter into the land, provision is made for them to have land adjacent to the cities the people of Israel build in the land. The Lord even tells the people how much land to measure off around the cities to provide for the Levites. Now, how often do a people feel left out? They feel as if no provision has been made for them. Maybe they are left out because they came into the community after many others. Or, perhaps, some other obstacle has blocked the way, keeping them from success. Now, don't get me wrong. God doesn't treat everyone the same. That just is not possible. Some of the tribes receive an inheritance of land that is better suited for raising cattle. Others receive land with soil fit for growing crops. But no one is left out. In the case of the Levites, the allotment the Lord provides takes into account where they will live and the needs they will have.

God's ways, as demonstrated here, push us to consider our own. Are we thinking about people and how to make sure they will not be left out? That's why I loved this story from the life of Cecil Rhodes. As much as it was important to him to dress well, there was something even more important. That was making sure there was room for others. That was what God was doing in his plan for the Levites. This really is a hallmark of the ministry of Jesus. He opened the way to God for people that showed up in wrinkled clothes, people the Pharisees said were not fit for the party. Indeed, once Jesus told a story about a great man that threw a great banquet. Many people said they would come, but when the party was ready, they had excuses. So, the master sent out his servants to the highways and byways to invite everyone in. No one would be left out of his party. This always makes me think about who I invite to my parties. This is the way of Jesus and what the gospel is. The gospel is God's invitation to people that have long been left out because they just didn't fit in. Jesus is always making room for more. He is always going to people far from God and bringing them home to his Father. So, the Levites, the ones that seemed left out, were not left out at all. That's good news for us, that God has prepared a place for us in his kingdom. I wouldn't mind having a place on the outskirts of town.

Let's pray:

Gracious and loving God, we draw circles to keep people out, and we find Jesus widening the circle of his love and inviting people in. Thank you for making room for us. Teach us the ways of Jesus that we might share in his joy. For we pray in his name. Amen.

### **Saturday, August 28**

Not long ago, when I was out in Colorado, I heard about the moving Memorial in Littleton, CO at the site of the Columbine High School Shooting. Likely you remember the shooting. On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School seniors, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, murdered 12 students and one teacher and injured 24 others. Harris and Klebold then committed suicide. It was, at the time, the deadliest shooting at a high school in American history. I'd like to visit the memorial as it carries the messages of the various students, staff and workers whose lives were lost or affected by this immense tragedy.

Now, here is our text for today:

Numbers 35:9-15

*And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>10</sup> "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, <sup>11</sup> then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. <sup>12</sup> The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. <sup>13</sup> And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge. <sup>14</sup> You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. <sup>15</sup> These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without intent may flee there.*

Now, in America right now, we are hearing these same concepts that we read in scripture. Yes, the idea for cities of refuge came from the Lord himself. But with some very distinct differences. God didn't call for cities of refuge to protect immigrants from being deported from the country. There are two main reasons the Lord made a provision for these cities. The first was to protect the land. The Lord told his people that the shedding of blood would pollute the good land he was giving to them. Yes, it sounds strange that blood is used to purify the tabernacle and the priests, and is also used for the atonement of the people. The right blood, used for the right purposes, cleansed the people from sins that lead to death. But, the wrong blood, especially the shed blood of human beings in the wrong place in the land the Lord provided to his people, would defile the good land.

This truth is stated later in this chapter in this way:

*You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the people of Israel.” -Numbers 35:33-34*

Yes, God dwells in the land with you. The shedding of human blood stains the land. It defiles. It pollutes. Now, these concepts are difficult for us to understand. But I think we do understand how something is hallowed, set apart and made different and holy. Visiting the memorial in Columbine no doubt gives this powerful impression. It is not only a reminder of the horrible crime committed, but it carries with it a power. The place becomes sacred ground. This is the feeling I had walking the allied cemetery in Normandy. Thousands of standing stones lined the ground. It was the reminder of the sacrifice that took place to secure the freedom of Europe. I realized that in each grave was the body of a man that sacrificed his life. I knew I was on holy ground. So, God says human life is so precious that when it is taken, when blood is shed unjustly, there is a stain on the land. We don't think this way today because we don't make spiritual connections so much anymore. Now, when such a killing of a person took place, Jewish justice was swift and clear. It was a life for a life. But here was the problem. What if the death was accidental, what we call manslaughter today? What if it was not premeditated or purposed? The Lord made a provision in the land to protect the person from revenge killing and for a sentence for manslaughter. He set aside cities in the land as cities of refuge. The person could flee there and be safe. The elders in that city would hear the person's case in a public hearing and deem whether the death was accidental. If so, the person would live in the city until that high priest died. During that time, the person would be safe from retribution. But he would be isolated from his family and cut off from his community. When a new high priest was installed, the person could return home and resume his life. Now, we won't go into all the ins and outs of the law, but it is important for us to see that God is always pursuing justice for his people, and what is done in the land comes to mark the land and stain the land. This means that as beautiful as the Columbine Memorial is, and as powerful a visit to Normandy is, the land is marked by sin and by death. God did not want this for his land and his people. You see, he was living there and in the midst of people.

Now, as I read this passage, I wonder if we are as protective of our community and our city. It is an amazing thing that even during the time of Jesus, during the time of Roman occupation, it was important that Jesus along with the two criminals had to be crucified outside the city. Why not inside the city? It was this awareness of the power of blood and especially bloodshed. There should be no stain on the city were everyone lived. But Jesus was not guilty. He did nothing wrong. Why did God arrange for Jesus to die outside the city? I think this happened so that we would always find refuge in the city. He was taken where we belong, outside the city, outside the camp, so that we might have a place to run, a place to be safe. He was making a place for us. And, yes, when our true high priest died, we were set free from sin and death.

Let's pray:

Forgive us, Lord. We overlook the sacred nature of the land and how it can be polluted by injustice. Thank you for creating the ultimate city of refuge in Christ, the place where we can find shelter from our sin. Give us a sense of the sacred in your world, a sense of how you value people and how you care for them. For we pray in your name. Amen.