

Planning Ahead



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 15; 2 Cor. 2:15, 16; Gal. 3:26–29; Eph. 5:2; Col. 3:11.*

Memory Text: “But I said unto their children in the wilderness, Walk ye not in the statutes of your fathers, neither observe their judgments, nor defile yourselves with their idols: I am the Lord your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them” (*Ezekiel 20:18, 19*).

At the beginning of Numbers 15, the scenes of tumult and rebellion, of shame and defeat (at the hands of the Amalekites and Canaanites), have now faded. The people have learned, the hard way, the suffering that disobedience brings.

The masses are now on the way back into the wilderness out of which they had first come. And it's at this point that the Lord communicates with Moses as the chapter opens: “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye be come into the land of your habitations, which I give unto you . . .” (*vs. 2*).

Despite the major setback, the promise was still sure: God would bring His people into the Promised Land. Of that there was no question!

Also, we come across some of the special instructions given to God's chosen people. However unique the circumstances, however unique the specific commands, there are spiritual lessons and principles given not only for them but for us, as well.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 7.*

Thankfulness

Read Numbers 15:1–10, 18–21. What were the purposes of these offerings? What did they represent? What was the purpose of bringing oil, drink, and grain, as well?

The Hebrew term for “meat/grain” is *minchah*, meaning “gift” or “tribute.” It included the flour, olive oil, and wine, representing the offerer’s gratitude for God’s blessings on the fields and crops (*see Deut. 8:18*).

In the context of Numbers 15, these directions really carried a promise to the younger generation that one day they would plant fields of wheat, barley, and other grains in their new home in Canaan. They would with their own hands establish vineyards on the hills and orchards of olive trees and other fruits such as figs and pomegranates. In other words, these nonbloody offerings helped point them to the material blessings that were to be theirs were they to remain faithful. No doubt, all these thoughts were wrapped up in their sacrifices to the Lord, which helped point them day by day to the land of promise that awaited them.

How did the apostle Paul apply this concept in New Testament times? *Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 2:15, 16; Eph. 5:2.*

However difficult their circumstances at present, the Lord wanted His people to cultivate an attitude of praise and gratitude for what He had done for them and what He promised to do for them in the future. Should not we do the same?

Whatever your present woes, why is it important to dwell on God’s goodness, love, and care? How does keeping the Cross before you help you better realize God’s love and care for you, even in the worst of times? What things can you be grateful for now, regardless of your situation? Why is dwelling on these blessings so important for us?

The Stranger Within Your Gates

One of the more radical ideas of ancient Israel dealt with their attitude toward strangers, toward those who were not of their heritage or of their faith.

What specific commands were given to the second generation of Israelites as they looked forward to settling in Canaan? *Num. 15:14–16*. **How** is this same principle revealed in the New Testament? *Gal. 3:26–29, Col. 3:11*.

The “stranger” or foreigner would be a person who settled among the Israelites and who fully accepted the faith and, if male, duly was circumcised. They were to be treated and loved as if they were Israelites. “One ordinance” or “one law” shall be for you, and “for the stranger that sojourneth with you” (*Num. 15:16*). Talk about inclusiveness!

In the dedicatory prayer at the opening of the first temple, what request did Solomon make of God in regard to non-Israelites? *1 Kings 8:41–43*. **What** does Isaiah have to say about the strangers who sought to worship at the temple? *Isa. 56:6, 7*.

When one considers the whole purpose of God calling out His people and establishing them in the Promised Land, these texts all make perfect sense. Israel had to maintain its distinctive teaching and truths, the teaching and truths that made them God’s special representatives to the pagan world. Yet at the same time, they needed to be open and receptive to the pagans who wanted to learn about their God and follow Him.

In many ways, our church today must do that same thing. We have specific truths to teach the world, truths that we need to guard and protect, and yet at the same time, we have to be willing to embrace those who are seeking to know the Lord and His message for this time.

In what ways is it so easy to be exclusive, judgmental, and condemnatory of those who don’t see things as we do? How can we avoid that attitude, and yet at the same time, protect the truths we have been given?

Sins of Ignorance

We must keep in mind that the younger generation that God is addressing in this chapter (*Numbers 15*) was born in slavery. Thus, they had been influenced by the Egyptian culture that surrounded them, as well as by their parents, who as slaves also were influenced by that same culture. Hence, they had a lot of bad things to unlearn and a lot of new and good things to learn.

If the congregation became aware that, as a group, they had erred from the Lord's commandments, what were they to do? What is the significance of the fact that they had to bring a "sin" offering to the Lord for what was done out of ignorance? *Num. 15:22–27*.

The sin offering atoned for their sin. The burnt offering represented a renewal of the congregation's consecration to God. How interesting that the Lord would distinguish between things done unintentionally and that which was deliberate. At the same time, however, even the things done unintentionally were deemed "sin" and needed to be atoned for.

How did an individual secure atonement for his or her sin of ignorance? How did this procedure differ from that of the congregation? *Num. 15:27–29*.

"There are those who have known the pardoning love of Christ and who really desire to be children of God, yet they realize that their character is imperfect, their life faulty, and they are ready to doubt whether their hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit. To such I would say, Do not draw back in despair. We shall often have to bow down and weep at the feet of Jesus because of our shortcomings and mistakes, but we are not to be discouraged. Even if we are overcome by the enemy, we are not cast off, not forsaken and rejected of God. No; Christ is at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Said the beloved John, 'These things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.'"—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 64.

How often do you tend to doubt whether you truly have been renewed by the Holy Spirit? What happened at the Cross that should give you the courage to press on, even when filled with doubt about your own salvation? See *Rom. 5:6–8*.

Sins of Defiance

Read Numbers 15:30, 31. What's happening here, and what lessons can we draw from it for ourselves? Why does the punishment seem so harsh? Where is grace in all this?

The phrase in the Hebrew is “with a high hand,” a posture of arrogance and rebellion. Israel truly sinned “with a high hand” against the Lord at Kadesh. But God commuted the death sentence to banishment in the wilderness. The point is, sins were taken very seriously by the Lord. Often in cases like this, those who afterward say that they are sorry, are, in fact, sorry only because they got caught, not sorry for the sins themselves. Against such hardness of heart, what can the Lord do? Sin truly must be repented of before it can be forgiven.

Read Numbers 15:32–36. Why do you think the Lord had the whole congregation take part in this execution? What spiritual lesson can we draw from this?

It must have been a difficult thing for a group of Israelites to stone one of their members to death. Evidently God was attempting to show His people the seriousness of sin. “The wages of sin is death” (*Rom. 6:23*). Perhaps, too, He sought to show them the corporate nature of their community and that what they did influenced others around them. What each one did, individually, still impacted the welfare of the whole. After all, was it not because of the complaining of some people that the whole camp was made to suffer by remaining in the wilderness?

As Christians, we especially need to be aware of the fact that our deeds, be they for good or for evil, impact others, as well as ourselves.

Meanwhile, though in the theocracy of ancient Israel death often came immediately, we shouldn't be fooled. Even though we aren't immediately struck dead for our defiance, that does not mean that we are not going to reap our just rewards one day.

How ready and willing are you to repent, confess, and admit your sins? Or, on the other hand, how often do you find yourself justifying your sins for one reason or another? Why is that so spiritually dangerous?

Tassels of Blue

If you have ever seen Orthodox Jews, you might have noticed them wearing something under their shirts with white tassels on it. Its origins are found here, in the Bible.

What did the Lord direct Moses to instruct every Israelite to attach to their garments? *Num. 15:38*.

Apparently attaching tassels of various colors was a common practice among the ancient peoples of the Near East, and God adopted the practice. The “fringe” (*KJV*) or tassel was attached to the four corners of the outer garment with a thread (“ribband,” *KJV*) of blue on each tassel. The modern *prayer shawl* has four tassels—one on each corner, tied in a traditional knot with white and blue threads.

What reason was given for wearing tassels? That is, what specific things did God want the Israelites to remember? *Num. 15:39–41*.

The word *remember* stands out twice in these verses. Every time an Israelite saw the tassels, he or she was to “remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy unto your God” (*vs. 40*). When tempted to go after other gods—spiritual adultery—the blue in the tassels would call him or her back to their sworn loyalty to God, the God who had brought the nation out of Egyptian slavery (*vs. 41*).

Apparently, even with the presence of God among them in such a marked manner, the Lord wanted to give them something even more immediate to help them remember what they needed to do.

Though we don’t wear tassels today, we have something so much more powerful: the cross of Christ, which always should bring before our minds the cost of sin, the cost of our redemption, and the promise of salvation for all who, through faith, trust in the merits of Jesus and who “follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (*Heb. 12:14*).

How could following Jesus’ words to “pray always” (*Luke 21:36*) help you remember what God has done for you and what He asks you to do in return?

Further Study: “Our confession of His faithfulness is Heaven’s chosen agency for revealing Christ to the world. We are to acknowledge His grace as made known through the holy men of old; but that which will be most effectual is the testimony of our own experience. We are witnesses for God as we reveal in ourselves the working of a power that is divine. Every individual has a life distinct from all others, and an experience differing essentially from theirs. God desires that our praise shall ascend to Him, marked by our own individuality. These precious acknowledgments to the praise of the glory of His grace, when supported by a Christ-like life, have an irresistible power that works for the salvation of souls.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 347.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Go through the Ellen G. White quote above. What is she saying? What important principles can we take from it? How do you understand the idea that our praise to God, along with a “Christ-like life,” can be a powerful influence on the salvation of others?
- 2 What has your own experience of giving praise and glory to God done for you in your walk with the Lord? Why is this attitude so important?
- 3 Dwell more on Monday’s lesson about how the Israelites were to treat the strangers among them. What other lessons can we take from this for ourselves today? How do we treat those who are not of our faith, those who hold views that we believe to be wrong? How should we treat them? At the same time, how do we show them that we believe we have something that they need to know, while not acting as if we are somehow superior? What lessons can we learn from the Israelites in this area?
- 4 What can we, as a community, do to help remind each other not only of what God has done for us but of what He expects us to do in response? What role does the Lord’s Supper have in helping us remember what we have in Jesus?

Summary: Although that first generation was condemned to wander in the wilderness until they died, the Lord would encourage their children to look forward to Canaan. Hence came God’s further instruction regarding sacrifices, a loving attitude toward the foreigner who converted to the faith, how to deal with sins of ignorance and sins of open defiance, and finally the attaching of blue tassels to their garments to remind them of God’s commandments and that their obedience to Him demonstrated the only way to true happiness.

Francesca's Special Ministry

by DEENA BARTEL-WAGNER

Francesca Watkins is nine years old and lives in Tennessee in the United States. She has lots of friends, but Ernestine is Francesca's special friend. Francesca enjoys being an example of Jesus to her friend Ernestine.

Ernestine has multiple sclerosis. She can't walk and must use a wheelchair to get around. When she first moved into Francesca's neighborhood, she didn't know anyone. Then Francesca came into her life.

"I learned that Ernestine doesn't get many visitors," Francesca says, "so I visit her after school. I bring in her mail, and we talk."

When Francesca noticed that Ernestine wasn't eating well because it was hard for her to cook, Francesca asked her mother how they could help. Now Francesca's mom prepares two healthful meals a day for Ernestine with lots of fruits and vegetables.

Sometimes Francesca doesn't feel like visiting Ernestine, but she goes anyway. "I promised Ernestine that I would visit every day, and it isn't fair not to keep my promise," Francesca says.

One day when Francesca stopped by, she found Ernestine lying on the floor of her garage. She had fallen from her wheelchair and couldn't get up. Francesca comforted her friend and then ran to get her sister, Sierra. After praying, the girls were able to get her back into her wheelchair.

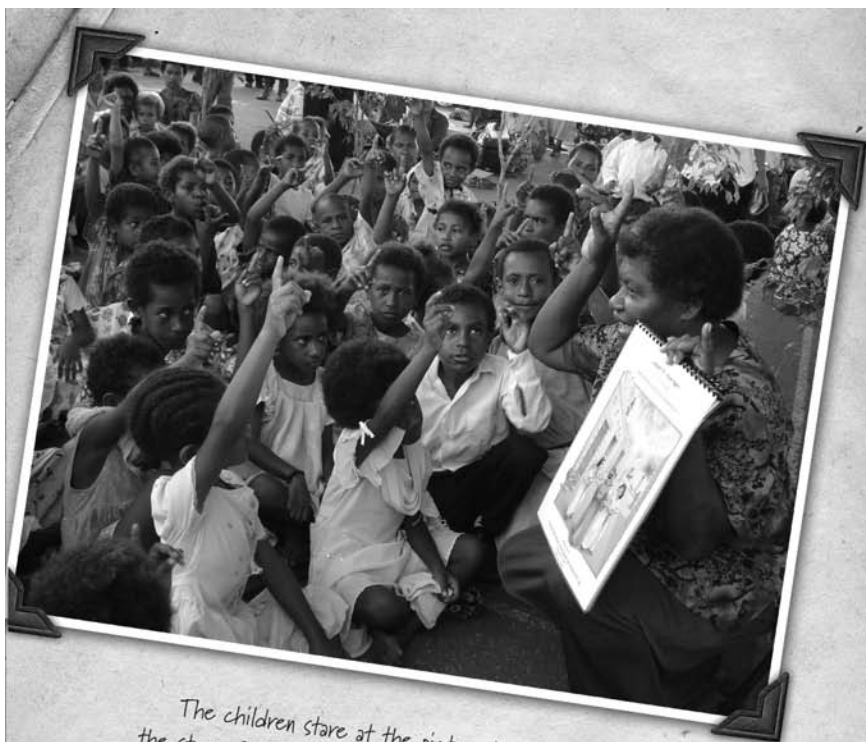
Francesca and Ernestine talk of many different things, but Francesca tries never to leave her friend before she has prayed with her. And whenever they can, Francesca enjoys taking Ernestine shopping when she goes. It's a fun way to help Ernestine get out of the house.

"It's not hard to share Jesus with other people around us," Francesca says. "When you find someone who doesn't know Jesus, you can just be their friend. Help them with something that they can't do and offer to pray that they will have a good day. When you do this, others will see Jesus in your life."

Friendship evangelism is so simple that many children are doing it. Our mission offerings help support all types of evangelism at home and in distant lands.



FRANCESCA AND ERNESTINE (left). DEENA BARTEL-WAGNER is a freelance writer living in New York.



The children stare at the picture their teacher holds up. Suddenly the story of Jesus comes alive! This is the Man who stilled the sea, who raised people from the dead, who called the children to Himself and blessed them. This is Jesus, and He's real!

For generations children around the world have had picture rolls and felts to illustrate Bible stories. But the children of the South Pacific islands have not seen them, for they've worn out years ago. They have had nothing to hold their attention as they hear the Bible stories.

But that's changing. Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help provide new, permanent picture charts for children in the islands of the Pacific. I want to help these children grasp the story of salvation, to understand the love that Jesus offers them. For me it's personal.

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