

“Hearts Turned to Egypt”

Numbers and Acts 7:39

As we read through the book of Numbers we see 3 major themes, Gods covenant relationship with Israel, Israel’s disobedience, and God’s faithfulness. We have a tendency to be critical of Israel, and sometimes rightly so. But, we also recognize that we are no better and would have most likely acted the same way. This poses a couple very important questions for us as we read Numbers and the rest of the Old Testament for that matter. Are we just like the Israel in the wilderness or are we different? How does Israel relate to the church and how does the Old Covenant relate to the New Covenant? What parallels should we glean from our readings that apply to us today and what should we see as abrogated and not to be expected today?

I believe the only place to look for answers to questions created by the Scriptures is in the Scriptures themselves. We must let Scripture interpret Scripture. One of the most amazing things about the Bible is that it is simple enough for a child to comprehend, yet confounds the wisest of men with its depth. As for the questions of how Israel relates to the church and how the Old and New Covenants relate to each other, the Bible gives us a simple answer. It’s all about the heart. In Acts 7:39 while Stephen is preaching the gospel to the High Priest just before he gets stoned to death he says about the Israelites in the wilderness under the Old Covenant, “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt.” Their problem was disobedience flowing out of hearts turning to Egypt.

Egypt was the only world that this generation had ever known. Things were not always bad in Egypt for the Israelites. It wasn’t until they became too numerous and Pharaoh grew paranoid of them that he made them slaves. Even as slaves they had homes, beds, food, times of peace and times of joy. They had a tendency to romanticize their past in Egypt. They forgot the bad and remembered the good. Every time things got rough in the wilderness they would remember Egypt. How many times did they grumble against Moses and say “it would have been better for us if we had stayed in Egypt”?

The answer to the question of how Israel relates to the church today is the heart. We are like Israel in many ways. We are God’s chosen people gathered together to represent him on the earth and we are fallen human beings prone to wander. But, there is a major difference; our hearts. To further understand this we must look at the heart of each covenant, the heart of both people groups, and the hearts of both mediators.

1. The Hearts of the Covenants

A covenant is a formal, binding contract or agreement between two or more parties, in which each party agrees to abide by specific *terms* spelled out by the covenant. There are two primary covenants found in the Old Testament, the Abrahamic Covenant, which was a covenant of grace, and the Mosaic Covenant, which was a covenant of works. When the author of Hebrews speaks of the Old Covenant that is made obsolete by the work of Jesus, he is referring to the Mosaic Covenant. The very heart of that covenant was the Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai written on tablets of stone. As you know it is an exhaustive list of do's and don'ts, and of rituals and ceremonies.

The Mosaic Covenant was given for several purposes:

- It marked the Israelites as God's chosen people on the earth
- It revealed the holiness of God to humanity
- It provided a connecting point between humanity and God
- It provided a temporary solution to the sin problem in humanity
- It taught humanity the inherent blessings of obedience and the curse of disobedience
- We know now that its ultimate purpose was to point people to Jesus

The Mosaic covenant was a covenant of human works that were impossible to fulfill in human power. No human being could ever keep the law perfectly. According to the New Testament, the standard of the law was that if you break one of them, no matter how big or small, you transgress the entire thing. In other words, it was all or nothing. Now let's contrast that with the heart of New Covenant.

The New Covenant is an agreement between God and a new people made up of all nationalities. It is not a covenant of works but a fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant of grace. It is a covenant where God performs the work and the other party is expected only to believe. The reward of the covenant is eternal life and blessing beyond measure. It comes with a Law but it is different. It does not contradict but builds upon and complements the Mosaic Law. It is the Law of the Spirit of life which brings freedom. The Israelites lived under a written law of sin and death.

The New Covenant was given for several purposes:

- It marks the church as God's chosen people on the earth
- It reveals the holiness of God to humanity
- It provides a connecting point between humanity and God
- It provides a permanent solution to the sin problem in humanity
- It reveals the glorious love and mercy of God for his creation
- It manifests Jesus on earth

At the very heart of the New Covenant is the work of Jesus. His perfect obedience, death on the cross, his resurrection to life, his ascension, his intercessory reign at the right hand of the Father, and his impending return to judge the earth.

2. The Hearts of the People

The best way for us to know the hearts of that generation wondering in the wilderness is to read Hebrews chapter 3. The author of Hebrews describes what was going on with the generation that put God to the test. He says they “went astray in their hearts” (3:10). They had unbelieving hearts (v.12) that were hardened in their rebellion (v. 15). They were unable to enter into the promise land, or God’s rest because of their unbelief (v. 19). Their hearts were made out of the same substance that their Law was recorded on, stone.

However, anyone belonging to the New Covenant by faith has a new heart. Their unbelieving stone heart has been replaced by a heart of flesh. The prophet Jeremiah prophesied this in chapter 31:31-34 *“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: **I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.** And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

Ezekiel says in 36:26-28 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

The majority of the Israelites acted the way they in the wilderness because they had unbelieving hearts. They lived according to their flesh. We have been given new hearts. Hearts that respond to spiritual things. We have the Holy Spirit of God living in us that guides and instructs our hearts. Yes, we are sinners, but we are born again sinners saved by the grace of God and under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. We have no excuse to live like Israel in the wilderness. Peter told us that unlike the Israelites *“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to^[c] his own glory and excellence,^[d]4 by which he has granted to us his*

precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet. 1:3-4).

3. The Hearts of the Mediators

Lastly, we will look at the differences of the mediators. Another way you can look at Moses and Jesus is as Shepherds. Moses was good man, but he was a man. He did a good job shepherding God’s people, but he wasn’t perfect. His own sin kept him from entering the promise land. Listen to the author of Hebrews in 3:1-6 compare Jesus and Moses.

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ² who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. ³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴ (For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵ Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later,⁶ but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.

Peter calls Jesus our “Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4). The greatest difference between Moses and Jesus as our shepherds is that Moses could only implore his people to believe and obey, Jesus compels his people to believe and obey. There is no earthly comparison to the love Jesus has for his sheep. It is a love that transforms those whom it comes into contact with.

Conclusion

So what are we to take away from these truths today?

1. Know how you relate to God through Christ Jesus

You are in a one-sided covenant with God through faith in Jesus. He didn’t save us and then ask us to work off our debt. He saved us and made us into a new people that considers it an honor to perform good works for his name’s sake. As New Covenant Christians we don’t work to be saved, we don’t work to earn more favor with God, and we don’t work to pay him back for saving us. We work simply because our new heart desires to bring him glory.

2. See that the world is divided into only 2 heart groups; those turned to Jesus and those turned to Egypt. Which one are you?

CG Questions

1. What are some contrasts between Israel's life under the Law and our life in the Spirit?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Israel in the wilderness and the believers today? What are some similarities/differences?
3. How would you describe the difference between the Mosaic Law written on tablets of stone and the Law of the Spirit written on our hearts?
4. What does it mean to have a heart turned toward Egypt?
5. What does a heart turned toward Jesus look like?