

Numbers 6:1-12

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The Terms of the Nazirite Vow

The requirements specified to the man or woman taking a Nazirite vow were given in verses 1 – 12. The Nazirite vow allowed a person who was not a Levite to participate in priestly activities, usually for a specified amount of time.

The familiar phrase *Again the Lord spoke to Moses, saying* (v. 1) is used to introduce a new topic. The LORD instructed Moses to *speak to the sons of Israel and say to them* what the next law was about.

This law concerned the occasion *when a man or woman makes a special vow* (v. 2) which was called *the vow of a Nazirite*. The word *Nazirite* comes from the Hebrew verb that means “to separate.” This vow involved a person (man or woman) volunteering to separate or *to dedicate himself to the Lord*. It was a way for someone who was not a priest to be consecrated to the LORD’s service.

The Nazirite vow as set forth in Numbers 6 is voluntary. A person chose to take this vow. Also, the vow was usually for only a specified amount of time. However, there are two examples in the Old Testament where the vow was appointed, and was for life. In the case of Samson, God appointed him to keep a Nazirite vow for life (Judges 13:5). In the case of Samuel, his appointment was vowed by his mother (1 Samuel 1:11).

In the New Testament, it is possible that John the Baptist took a life-long Nazirite vow, as Jesus described him as “not eating and drinking” (John 11:18-19). Also, Paul apparently took a Nazirite vow for a period of time, as he shaved his head when the vow ended (Acts 18:18). Some of the believing Jews in Jerusalem also practiced the Nazirite vow custom, as shown in Acts 21:23-24. It is also possible that Jesus took a Nazirite vow in part when He declared He would not “drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25).

Along with dedicated service to the LORD, the Nazirite vow included three commitments. First, the person had to keep from drinking any alcoholic beverage, including anything associated with the grape. In this regard:

- *He shall abstain from wine and strong drink* (v. 3). The “he” refers to anyone who made the Nazirite vow, whether male or female. Drinking alcohol was occasionally associated with doing things counter to God’s law (see Prov. 31:4 – 6). However, most biblical instructions regarding alcohol admonish prudence and wisdom (Proverbs 20:1). In this case, the abstention of anything fermented or related to grapes appears to be a constant reminder of the vow.

- *He shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink.* “Vinegar” is the result of grapes or other juice (such as apple cider) fermenting to the point of bitterness. The word translated *vinegar* is used as a picture for bitterness (Proverbs 10:26, 25:20). It appears that even if flavored in such a way as to make it refreshing and enjoyable, or used in other contexts, such as dipping sauce, it was still prohibited (Ruth 2:14).
- *Nor shall he drink any grape juice nor eat fresh or dried grapes.* The vow-taker was not allowed to drink even unfermented “grape juice”. Nor was he or she allowed to eat any grapes of any type, including raisins.

To sum up, *all the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from the seeds even to the skin* (v. 4). Any product of the grapevine was off-limits to everyone who took the Nazirite vow. Since grapes were an integral part of the daily diet in Israel, this restriction would create a continual reminder of the vow, and the Nazirite’s separation unto the Lord.

The second commitment required the Nazirite to leave his hair uncut, meaning that *all the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head* (v. 5). The reason for this was that he was to *be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord*. The person was to *let the locks of hair on his head grow long*. To be *holy* was to be separated for special service, as with this Nazirite vow.

A reason for not cutting the hair and letting it grow long is not given. But like the abstention from grape products, the long hair might serve as a constant reminder of the vow. Additionally, in time it might be a visible sign to others that the person was in the period of his or her vow.

The third commitment that the person had to make was that *all the days of his separation to the Lord he shall not go near to a dead person* (v. 6). He was not to even approach a dead body because that would *make himself unclean* (v. 7). This applied even *for his father or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die*. So, as tragic as it might be, one who took the Nazirite vow could not even be near a close family member during the time of the vow. This had to be *because his separation to God is on his head*.

The person had to be completely dedicated to serving the LORD, even to the point of not meeting his or her obligations in the family at a time of loss. Instead, *all the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord* (v. 8). Because the Nazirite was totally dedicated to serving the LORD and Him alone, he or she had to separate from the family even in the time of mourning.

Verses 9 – 12 spell out what was to happen if a Nazirite inadvertently came near a dead body. The situation was that *if a man dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his dedicated head of hair* (v. 9). In other words, it was possible that one who took a Nazirite vow came near or into contact with a dead body accidentally, through no fault of their own.

In this case, the Nazirite needed to

- *Shave his head on the day when he becomes clean.* This was to be done *on the seventh day* after he or she became unclean due to being near a corpse.

- After the time of being unclean, *on the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest, to the doorway of the tent of meeting* (v. 10). These were sin offerings (Leviticus 12:6) that were less expensive (Leviticus 12:8), and the Nazirite was to bring the birds to the priest so that he or she could be purified.
- Then *the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering* (v. 11). The purpose of the offerings was to *make atonement for him concerning his sin because of the dead person*.
- Lastly, *that same day he shall consecrate his head*. This means that the person was not to cut his or her hair once atonement had been made for the accidental touching of the dead person.

At this time, the person again was to *dedicate to the Lord his days as a Nazirite* (v. 12). To do this, he or she was to *bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering*. The lamb was a more valuable offering and was necessary when performing a “guilt offering.” This appears to be a part of the offering required at the end of the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:13-15). So it appears that this accidental termination of the vow period due to incidental contact with a dead corpse is to be considered the termination of a vow period, and appropriately ended with a sacrifice prior to starting a new vow period.

Even though the premature termination was dedicated through the offering it was still the case that *the former days will be void because his separation was defiled*. In other words, the time of the vow would start over—the time already spent in the vow would no longer be considered as a part of the vow period.

One thing to note about this section is the emphasis on the hair. If a Nazirite was contaminated by being near a dead body, the hair had to be shaved off and the process of growing it out again started over once he or she was purified and consecrated again. This shows the importance of the hair during the time of a Nazirite vow.

Biblical Text

¹ **Again the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,** ² **“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the Lord,** ³ **he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, nor shall he drink any grape juice nor eat fresh or dried grapes.** ⁴ **All the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from *the* seeds even to *the* skin.** ⁵ **‘All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long.** ⁶ **‘All the days of his separation to the Lord he shall not go near to a dead person.** ⁷ **He shall not make himself unclean for his father or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head.** ⁸ **All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord.** ⁹ **‘But if a man dies very suddenly beside him and he defiles his dedicated head *of hair*, then he shall shave his head on the day when he becomes clean; he shall shave it on the seventh day.** ¹⁰ **Then on the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons to the priest, to the doorway of the tent of meeting.** ¹¹ **The priest shall offer one for**

a sin offering and *the* other for a burnt offering, and make atonement for him concerning his sin because of the *dead* person. And that same day he shall consecrate his head,¹² and shall dedicate to the Lord his days as a Nazirite, and shall bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering; but the former days will be void because his separation was defiled.