Numbers is a book of rebellions; everyone rebels at some point in the book. The Nazarites stand in contrast to this. They are those who will separate themselves for God.

It provides a way of offering yourself to God.
Amos 2:11-12 seems to suggest it was a way to serve God. They are an agent of God's will. Each of the lifetime Nazarites had complex divine tasks to achieve.

Why do you think Paul took a Nazarite vow?

We do not know. An act of thanksgiving? Struggling with the complexity of the task? Something he was praying for? Feeling the need to come close to God?

Did Jesus take a Nazarite vow? Luke 22:18

Part III Us

Do you know anyone who has taken a Nazarite vow?
How common are they among Christians?

How do you feel about making any kind of a vow to God?

If Judaism moved away from these vows, so have we. Vows are all over the Bible; they were an important part of faith. We struggle to separate a vow as an act of thanks, love or devotion from one of Control.

"God, if you will do this for me, then I will…."
Is this a good thing?
Why? Why not?

Most of the time it is not; sometimes it is. The danger is that we are using a promise to control God or get something from Him.
A vow that says thank-you is a positive thing.
A vow as an act of devotion is a positive thing.
There are good vows and bad vows.

When might you make a vow?
What are the pros and cons?

You will realise from the three points made above that there is a lot in a Nazarite vow.

Is it good to take time in our lives to separate ourselves from the ordinary world?
Is it good to take a limited time to serve God in a special way?
Is it good to see yourself as a sacrifice?
Is it good to take time out of the business of life to concentrate on relationship with God?
Is it good to mark yourself out as Holy to the Lord?
Is it good to think of yourself as a priest?
Is it good to keep yourself away from what is unclean?
When might you need to dedicate or consecrate yourself to God?

What is Jesus likely to say about the long hair? Matthew 6:17-18

Answering these questions would suggest there is still a place for a Nazarite vow.
You could go further and say that much of what it means to be a Christian looks like a nazarite (small n) vow.

What might a Nazarite vow look like in your life?
How might you do it?
When might you do it?
What would you abstain from?

FREEDOM
Christian Church

The Nazarite Vow

Read Numbers 6:1-8

This passage gives instructions about taking a Nazarite vow. (Verses 9 to 21 will give further details and sacrifices that need to be made.)

What is a vow?

A vow is something that you promise to God. It could be part of an agreement you make with God (if… then I will), or it could be an act of thanksgiving or just something given to God.

Part I - The Nazarites.

What were the basic conditions of a Nazarite vow?

Nothing grape-related
Let your hair grow
No contact with a dead body.

Judges 13:4 adds unclean food.

What was the purpose of the vow? v8

The purpose of the vow was dedication and consecration to God. Consecrate means to set apart.

The Hebrew word נָזִיר Nazeir means to give something to God, or to separate something for God. The word is used to describe the food not harvested in the sabbatical year, Leviticus 25:11. It has the idea of abstaining behind the word. The root letters of the word also find their way into the Hebrew word for a crown.

Read Judges 13:4-5

Who was the child
What were the conditions?

It has been suggested that he was allowed to touch dead bodies, as he did without apparently breaking his vow. It has also been suggested that Sampson's vow was a unique kind.

Read 1 Samuel 1:11

Who was the child?
What were the conditions?

Read Luke 1:15

Who was the child?
What were the conditions?

What did these children have in common?
What kind of task did each have to perform?

You might have noticed a small problem here. None of these people fulfil the description of a Nazarite in Numbers 6. Each of them was a Nazarite from birth and for life. The passage in Numbers describes a temporary vow that an adult man or woman took for a period of time that they chose.
This means there are two types of Nazarite vow: a lifelong vow and a temporary vow.

Who is the First Testament took a temporary Nazarite vow as described in Numbers 6?

The answer is no one! Oops. Fortunately, the New Testament comes to our rescue.

Read Acts 21:23-24
Who took a Nazarite vow?

The scene is the Temple; Paul has been accused of teaching Jews not to keep the law and tradition, something he did not do. (he told Gentiles not to keep the law, not Jews.)

How did shaving your head work with a Nazarite vow? Numbers 6:18-19

It is safe to say these men had taken a Nazirite vow. The sacrifices were expensive and it was not uncommon for a sponsor, in this case Paul, to pay for the sacrifices. In New Testament times, the vow started with shaving your head and ended with shaving your head.

Read Acts 18:18
Who took a Nazarite vow?

It looks like Paul did. We have no record of when his vow came to an end. It would have to have ended in Jerusalem. We will consider why Paul may have done this later. But this passage clearly tells us Paul saw merit in a Nazarite vow.

All this raises another problem about the way the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, are written. Numbers is not giving us the whole story; there is a kind of Nazarite vow it tells us nothing about. You will find this same problem in other laws. The first readers of Numbers already knew what a Nazarite vow was and how it worked. It is clear from the way Numbers introduces it as a concept the people knew and already practised. Numbers builds on existing knowledge.

If the First Testament does not record any temporary Nazarite vows, does that mean no one took one?

No, it doesn't; silence is no proof. Certainly people would have. (Jeremiah 7:24 and 35:6-7?)

Read Amos 2:11-12
Were there Nazarites?
We also have references to Nazarites in the Book of Maccabees and the histories of Josephus.

The Nazarite vow stopped being performed in Judaism with the destruction of the temple. If sacrifices could not be made, a vow could not be ended, so anyone taking a temporary vow would have to do so for the rest of their life. Later, the Rabbis feared that pride would be a big motivation in this vow. They did not like this.
There are the odd exceptions.

If you accidentally broke the rules, what happened? Numbers 6:12
The Rabbis considered 30 days the minimum and the normal period of a vow.

Part II – Why?

Why no wine?
Why no grapes?

Wine is understandable; grapes less so. We do not have a strong answer to the grape question. The most obvious is that they had to reject the norms of ordinary life. They had to be different and separate.

Why long hair?

Hair here plays an interesting role. You could tell how long a person had kept their vow by the length of their hair. It also made the vow public. A Nazarite was easily recognisable.

Hair could be a symbol of vitality, or of a persons life-force.

It is described as a symbol of their consecration or separation (נֵזֶר Nezer) on their head. Numbers 6:7

The rabbis allowed a lifelong Nazirite to cut their hair once a year. 2 Samuel 14:26.

Burning the hair at the end of the vow made a stink. A public signal of the end of the vow.

John the Baptist was from a priestly family. Priests were not allowed to let their hair grow long, Ezekiel 44:18; Leviticus 10:6. This could be a reason we never read of him functioning as a priest.

Why no dead bodies?
The Torah considers death as the ultimate unclean. Only the High priest had the same restrictions concerning who they could mourn for..

If you read Leviticus, you will find restrictions similar to those for priests. There seems to be a synergy.
All of these speak of separation from the world in some way.

The most important thing we are told about the Nazarites is:
They must be holy Numbers 6:5
Throughout the period of their dedication, they are consecrated (holy) to the LORD. Numbers 6:8

Why take a Nazarite vow?
The big question is why, what was achieved by taking a Nazarite vow?

Who took the initiative in making the vow? Numbers 6:2

The vow was voluntary. God did not command it, it was freely made. (This appears not to be true for the life long version where God usually instructed it.)

1 It was a way to say thank you to God
What might people want to say thank you for?
The obvious answer was the birth of a child, but maybe recovery from an illness or provision of a need.

2 The Nazarite is described as being holy to God, Numbers 6:5, 8.
This is the same phrase that is used of the High Priests, Exodus 39:30. The Israelites lived in a world defined by levels of holiness. A Nazarite vow appears to have raised the holiness of an ordinary person to that of a priest. This does not mean they functions as a priest; they couldn't. It let them show the same kind of devotion as a priest. A holy calling.
(It could have been that the Nazarites were the priests before the house of Aaron were given this role.)

The priest made sacrifices; the Nazarite gives themselves as a sacrifice, Romans 12:1.

3 Separation from the ordinary. Setting aside a specific time to emphasise closeness to God. A time to seek God. A Nazarite vow emphasis the things that we do when we fast, but set over a longer time-frame. It is good to give things up and to separate ourselves for a time from things that distract.