



MORE THAN ARITHMETIC

Numbers 1–4

In these opening chapters of Numbers, we see God preparing His people for their journey to the promised land. He not only begins preparing them for the military operation to come; He also stresses the spiritual priorities that will make them successful in their daily lives.

As we begin our journey through the Old Testament book of Numbers, I think I hear some of you saying, “Oh, no, the Book of Numbers! Can any good thing come out of Numbers?” Well, maybe that’s because you’re intimidated by numbers, especially if you’re like I was back in high school, where I failed Algebra I and had to take it again in summer school in order to get into college. And I barely passed the course the second time and got into college on probation. I had a problem with numbers.

Now, how did a book of the Bible get a title like this? The simple answer is that many centuries ago when the Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew language into the Greek language, the translators

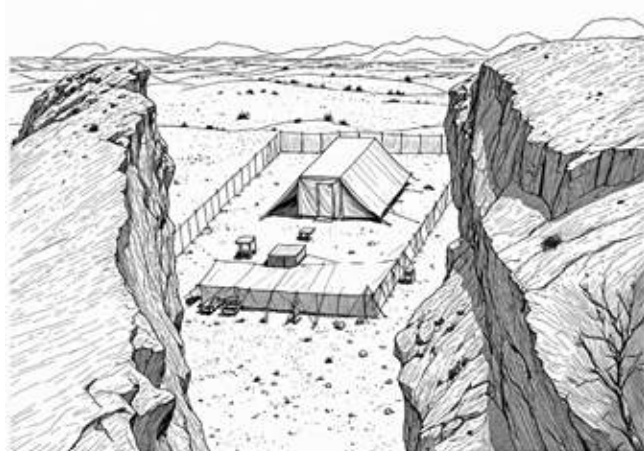
gave this book the name *Arithmoi*, which gives us our word *arithmetic*, and is translated into English, “Numbers.” This title was chosen because a national census—a numbering of the people—opens the book, and then another one occurs at the end of the book.

The Hebrew title of this book is *Bemidbar*, which means “in the wilderness.” That name was chosen because the book opens in verse 1, “The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.” Everything that takes place in the book of Numbers is entirely in the wilderness.

For Moses and the people of Israel, the Sinai wilderness was a place of spiritual challenge and discipline. Sometimes we find ourselves in a “wilderness” of our own making. At other times God leads us into a “wilderness” to strengthen our faith.

And for all of us, the way out of our wilderness is to trust and obey the Lord. Because Israel will fail to do that, they’re going to spend a long time in the wilderness.

By the way, the only survival skills you need in the wilderness, beloved, is trust in the will of God and obedience to the Word of God.



Model of the Tabernacle



Well, right here at the beginning of this book, we have the first numbering of Israel and the reason for it, as the Lord speaks in verses 2-3:

“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans ... according to the number of names, every male ... from twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war.”

Israel was facing war with all the nations of people who lived in Canaan, the land God had promised to give the children of Abraham centuries earlier and to which He was now leading them. The Canaanites had polluted this land with their wickedness and idolatry.

Now these wicked nations knew what was coming and who was coming their way. They could have chosen to lay down their weapons, repent of their sins, and submit to the Lord. But they're not about to do that, just as the world today isn't about to surrender their lives to the Lord. They would rather fight against God than lay down their arms and follow His leadership.

So here, the Lord is numbering His people in preparation for war. And all the way down to verse 46, the men capable of joining the army are enumerated at just over 600,000. The rest of the chapter explains that the tribe of Levi, Israel's priestly tribe, is exempt from military service because they are assigned to take care of the tabernacle.

Now as we move into chapter 2 of Numbers, there's a military tone to what the Lord instructs here. Verse 2: “The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses.”

Each tribe has its own logo, so to speak, embroidered on its own tribal flag. The rest of this chapter tells how the camp is to be arranged, with the tabernacle in the middle, and three tribes encamped on the east, three tribes on the west, and so on.

Note this little detail we are given here at the end of verse 2: “They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.” The “tent of meeting” is another name for the tabernacle. This is the place where the visible presence of the God of the universe is manifested in the pillar of smoke and fire. Every tribe is to be positioned so that the flap of every household tent opens toward the presence of God. They couldn't possibly start their day without seeing the cloud of God's presence.

They couldn't go one day without being reminded that God was their Commander-in-Chief. He was personally leading them on this journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

Now in chapters 3 and 4, the military tone is set aside, and the focus is on the tabernacle and the worship of God. Chapter 3 begins by identifying the two remaining sons of Aaron and ordaining them into the priesthood. The rest of the chapter focuses on the descendants of Levi, and we're given here in verse 8 their specific job description: “They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle.”

Then in chapter 4, every aspect of setting up the tent of the tabernacle is assigned. Every single tent peg,

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all the tent coverings, the boards, the frame, the curtains—all of it could be set up and taken down in a matter of a few hours. The tabernacle came together like a puzzle whenever they set up camp. Everyone had his place of service, and the guy who drove in a tent peg was just as important as the guy who hung the curtain in the Holy Place.

What a great illustration this is of the church in this New Testament dispensation. Every believer has a part to play and a gift to use in service as we work together in worshiping the Lord and offering the world the genuine worship of God through Jesus Christ.

Now let me pull these four chapters together and see if we can get past all the numbers and details down to where we live.

First, I want you to notice how God gave just the right amount of information to Israel before they left on this journey. They might have wanted to know more about what was ahead—after all, God is numbering them for *battle*. But God gave them just enough information to get started.

You might want more information from the Lord right now about your walk of faith—some answers about the next step of faith—but God never lets you see around the corner, does He? The Christian life has a lot of corners you can't see around, until you get there. Well, just like the Israelites, you can trust God to give you just enough information to take the next step.

Second, during Israel's journey, every time they began a new day, they faced the sanctuary, the tabernacle of God. That's a great reminder for us to not walk out our front door each day without looking to the Lord for wisdom and direction.

I am reminded of that great hymn of the faith that calls us to depend on our gracious Lord as He faithfully leads us around every corner in life. It goes like this:

*Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,
Hold me with Thy pow'rful hand.¹*

Who in your life fits the description of the nations, Israel was going to encounter? What has kept you from relating to them to gain the right to the share the gospel with them? Why is praying for them an effective way to prepare both you and them for what wants to do in each of your lives? (Matthew 9:26-38)

Consider your daily routine. How intentional are you to remind yourself of God's presence in your life (Psalm 63:1)? Why is such a reminding exercise important for you, and those you may encounter today?

¹ William Williams, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah."





PAVING A PATH TO PURITY

Numbers 5–6

Neither a church nor an individual can hope to follow and honor the Lord without a commitment to pursuing holiness. As these chapters in Numbers remind us, a holy life is not sin-free, but it is marked by a desire to be free of sin in every relationship and activity of life.

In the book of Numbers, the Lord is preparing Israel to follow Him through the wilderness and into the promised land.

They need to be ready for battle, and they need to be aware of God's presence, as we saw in chapters 1 through 4. Now here in chapters 5 and 6, the Lord puts the people on the path to personal purity as well as holy living as a nation.

The Lord speaks to Moses at the beginning of chapter 5:

“Command the people of Israel that they put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge and everyone who is unclean through contact with the dead. . . . that they may not defile their camp, in the midst of which I dwell.” (verses 2-3)

This command might appear to lack compassion, but earlier in Leviticus 13:46, the Lord delivered this same command concerning ceremonial uncleanness.

You see, at this point, these physical illnesses symbolized sin, and God wanted sin kept out of the camp. So, He's saying to His people, “It's time to make the camp clean. I live here; I dwell in your midst, and I'm calling you to holy living.” This is not a heartless command. In fact, there were additional laws about allowing these same people back into the camp once they were cleansed.

Paving the path to purity not only involved cleanness in the camp; it included interpersonal relationships as well. We read here in verse 6 what God says:



Model of Egyptian artisans



“When a man or woman commits any of the sins . . . and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin . . . And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.”

In other words, if the community is to be pure, the people need to deal with sin in their personal relationships. Unresolved conflicts are poisonous to a community of God’s people. They can destroy a nation, a school, a family, a ministry team.

The Lord Jesus addressed this when He said if you know someone has something against you, you should immediately go and be reconciled to that person. This even takes precedence over worship (Matthew 5:24).

And sometimes reconciling with a person you have wronged involves making restitution. God says here that you don’t just apologize for stealing or causing someone loss; you pay for the person’s loss.

But what happens if someone is stealing another person’s husband or wife? That’s a whole lot more serious. The remainder of Numbers 5 outlines a trial procedure involving an accusation of adultery.

We’re given a case here where a husband suspects his wife of being unfaithful. He’s not sure his suspicions are correct. She’s denying it, and there are no eyewitnesses to testify against her.

Now keep in mind that this rather unique trial procedure is going to depend on God’s direct intervention. He *is* an eyewitness and knows the truth.

First, the jealous husband brings his wife to the priest here in verse 15 along with a grain offering. We then read in verse 16, “And the priest shall bring her near and set her before the LORD.”

Then the priest puts some dust from the tabernacle floor into a jar of water taken from the basin. All

this has symbolic significance and points to the holy presence of God.

The Lord’s instructions continue:

“The priest shall make her take an oath, saying, ‘If no man has lain with you, and if you have not turned aside to uncleanness while you were under your husband’s authority, be free from this water of bitterness that brings the curse. But if you have gone astray . . . and some man other than your husband has lain with you, then . . . May this water that brings the curse pass into your bowels and make your womb swell and your thigh fall away.’ And the woman shall say, ‘Amen, Amen.’” (verses 19-20, 22)

The woman’s “Amen,” or “Let it be,” expresses her agreement with God’s judgment.

So, if she’s guilty, she will essentially have immediate internal pain and will remain forever childless. But what if she’s innocent? The text says in verse 28, “But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, then she shall be free and shall conceive children.”

I imagine by now a guilty woman would break down and confess rather than drink this water and risk her future health. But remember, this is a public trial; so, you can imagine this serious moment when secret sin is going to be revealed by God.

I can imagine the other Israelites in this crowd doing a heart-check on their own secret thought life—perhaps even their own adulterous relationships. This is a moment in the life of the entire community when God is paving a path to purity.



Now the other side of the coin here is the possibility of an unreasonable, jealous husband. He's accused his wife without physical evidence, perhaps without a heart-to-heart talk with her and a serious evaluation of his own heart. If she's innocent, he is about to be publicly humiliated—not to mention the tragic consequences to his own marriage and the disgrace he's going to bring to his wife and family.

So, this isn't a trial procedure that everybody's going to run to if they feel a little suspicious.

And the falsely accused wife can take comfort in the fact that she is standing *"before the Lord."* She can rest in knowing that He knows her heart and her life—and He's about to reveal her innocence.

Let me tell you, this trial from the Lord is divinely brilliant. Who's going forward with it when you have the obvious presence of God there in the pillar of cloud? Maybe that's why we have no record in Scripture of this trial ever being used in Israel. It seems it was certainly enough to make a statement, however—and pave a path to purity.

Now in chapter 6, the subject turns to the holy vow of a Nazirite. The Nazirite vow was a voluntary oath setting oneself apart to serving God for a specific period of time. The Nazirite was identified by his uncut hair, abstinence from any product of the grapevine, and the avoidance of contact with anything that had died.

In these two chapters, God illustrates—and encourages—taking a path that leads to purity, whether it's ceremonial cleansing, reconciled relationships, marital faithfulness, or a vow to avoid any appearance of sin or compromise.

And if you're thinking, *I'm glad I'm not living in Old Testament times, where purity was such a big deal*, well, think again. The apostle Paul encourages the same passion for purity in 2 Corinthians 7:1: "Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God." The New Testament believer should be no

less passionate about purity than an Old Testament individual.

Now here at the end of Numbers 6, the Lord gives the priests a blessing to speak over the people of Israel. The words may be familiar to you:

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (verses 24-26)

Wow, this blessing is the icing on the cake. It gives you and me, to this day, the highest motivation we can have to pursue holiness and live for God. Why? Because we love this great and gracious God who blesses us and keeps us and causes His face to shine upon us and gives us peace.

What role does prayer and God's word have in your efforts to resolve conflict with others? Why is "avoidance" in resolving conflict such a powerful tool in Satan's tool box? Who is always the innocent "third person" in any unresolved conflict between believers?

Married or Single: what are you actively doing to honor and guard your marriage or relationships from impurity? What does this ritual teach about God's view of marital or relational purity?

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THE PREPARATION IS COMPLETE

Numbers 7–9

We prepare for many things—career, family, retirement, even death. But chapters 7–9 of the book of Numbers reminds us that we are never really prepared for the future at all unless we are committed to praising, thanking, and worshiping the Lord.

There's an old proverb that says to be prepared is half the victory. Well, the Lord is certainly preparing His people Israel for the journey through the wilderness to the promised land.

Here now in chapters 7–9 of the book of Numbers, the preparation continues. In fact, the way Moses records the events is going to send the clear message that the Lord's preparation is coming to completion and the people of God are ready to follow Him.

The events recorded in chapters 7, 8, and 9 occur chronologically *before* Numbers chapters 1–6. ¹ I believe it's laid out this way to emphasize that the Lord has done His part in preparing the people of Israel. Now the question remains: Will they do their part in following Him?

Now let's go to Numbers 7:

On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle and had anointed and consecrated it with all its furnishings . . . the chiefs of the tribes . . . approached and brought their offer-



Artist's version of the lampstand from the tabernacle

ings before the LORD, six wagons and twelve oxen, a wagon for every two of the chiefs, and for each one an ox. They brought them before the tabernacle. (verses 1-3)

It's as if the Lord is saying in these verses, "Load 'em up! The wagons are here!" It looks like Moses and the people are beginning to do their part!

At the Lord's instruction, Moses gives the wagons to the Levites to help transport the tabernacle structure.



Keep in mind, they are still at Mount Sinai, but they will soon be heading out.

We read in verses 10-11 that the chiefs of the tribes bring offerings for the dedication of the altar of sacrifice. Numbers 7 is one of the longest chapters in the Bible, and verse 12 all the way through verse 88 presents a lengthy description of these offerings.

Each tribe offers exactly the same gifts, which are detailed beginning in verse 13:

One silver plate . . . one silver basin . . . both of them full of fine flour mixed with oil for a grain offering; one golden dish . . . full of incense; one bull from the herd, one ram, one male lamb a year old, for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and for the sacrifice of peace offerings, two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five male lambs a year old. (verses 13-17)

Now if you're reading the Bible through and you get to a chapter like this one, and the same offering is repeated twelve times, as it is here, about the third time through, you're going to skip to the end of the chapter. Why the redundancy?

Well, the repetition emphasizes several things here. First of all, this is a ceremony, as each tribe makes their way to offer these gifts. And repeating the gifts makes it clear that no tribe is superior to any other tribe; even the smallest tribe is not inferior in the sight of God. They have equal privileges and equal access to God and equal standing in the covenant as God's people, Israel.

There's something else here too. Moses recorded the presentation of each tribe's gift because each gift is of equal value before God. In fact, if you understand

the context here, this passage would have been read aloud. This is a time of great grandeur and ceremony. It is much like a graduation, where every graduate's full name is read, along with the honors received, and we watch each graduate march across the platform. As their tribe is called, the members of that tribe would parade in front of the assembly, filled with a sense of pleasure and honor in fulfilling their responsibility.

And don't miss that this is all by God's design, which means that God takes pleasure and enjoyment in His people offering their costly gifts to His service.²

Finally, here's one more observation by Warren Wiersbe:

He knows our names (John 10:3) and has recorded them individually in His heavenly register (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). When we stand before the Lord, He will see us individually, "and then shall every man have praise of God" (1 Cor. 4:5) and "every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor" (3:8). Nobody will be overlooked and nobody will be lost in the crowd.³

The fact that God noted and recorded each name and each gift indicates His love for and interest in the individual believer.

Now here in Numbers chapter 8, the Levites are ordained and commissioned to serve as the assistants to Aaron and his sons in the work of the tabernacle. They take a bath and put on clean clothes. The people lay hands on them, which means they recognize that the Levites will be representing them in their service, and sacrifices are offered. Then we read in Numbers



8:22, “And after that the Levites went in to do their service in the tent of meeting [the tabernacle].”

Verses 24-25 inform us that the Levites will serve from the age of twenty-five to the age of fifty. It seems they were retired from service at the age of fifty. Does that mean you can't serve the Lord after age fifty? Well, for these assistants, keep in mind the heavy lifting and the management of animals. This was physically demanding work that required a lot of muscle. Retirement at age fifty was a way of protecting them from harm in their later years.

So, with the consecration of the Levites, another element of the preparation of the nation is now complete.

In chapter 9 the Lord reminds the people of Israel regarding the Passover celebration, which they observe there at Mount Sinai. The Lord doesn't want them to forget their deliverance from Egypt, especially as they set out from Sinai and head into the wilderness toward the promised land. They need to remember that the Lord was able to lead them, provide for them, and protect them in the past, and they can trust Him to do the same in the future.

Chapter 9 then concludes with a description of the glory cloud that descended on the tabernacle, revealing the presence of God. This is the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that will lead the people through the wilderness. Verse 17 says:

Whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the

place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

The message for Israel could not be clearer. God has prepared His people; it's time to do their part and follow Him in faith.

Why are “equal privilege, equal access and equal standing” important biblical doctrines to teach, embrace and practice among believers in the Church today? What are typical consequences to believers and unbelievers to *not* living by them?

What events in your history serve as reminders of the Lord's faithfulness in supplying your needs? Why is such remembering important to your worship? To your motivation to obey in the future? To your effectiveness in sharing the gospel with others?

¹ The day Moses set up the tabernacle (Numbers 7:1) was the first day of the *first month* in the second year after Israel left Egypt, according to Exodus 40:17. This was one month before the Lord spoke in Numbers 1:1 on the first day of the *second month* after Israel departed from Egypt.

² Thomas Constable, *Notes on Numbers*, 2021 edition (Sonic Light, 2021), 43, planobiblechapel.org.

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Counted* (David C. Cook, 1999), 30.

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FRESH FOOD AND A POWER PLAY

Numbers 10–12

The people Moses led are a warning to us that complaining about difficult circumstances is not just counterproductive; it's also an affront to God. Rather than complain about what He allows in our lives, we should be grateful He is always present to help and encourage us.

There's a part of all of us that finds it easy to see something we're missing in life and ignore so many of God's blessings. That's a pretty good description of the nation Israel. They are quick to complain. In fact, their complaining spirit shows up almost as soon as they leave Mount Sinai and head into the wilderness.

God commands Moses here in Numbers chapter 10 and verse 2:

"Make two silver trumpets. Of hammered work you shall make them, and you shall use them for summoning the congregation and for breaking camp."



Trumpet from the tomb of Pharaoh Tutankhamen

So, here we have the sound of the trumpet signaling the Israelites to pack up their gear and get ready to move out.

The next few verses inform us that the priests also will blow on these trumpets to call the people to assemble at the tabernacle, to announce some festival or feast, or to prepare for battle. So, the trumpets relate to various aspects of life and, according to verse 10, serve as "a reminder of you before your God." In other words, the measure of Israel's faith is going to be seen in the way they respond to the sound of these trumpets.

You and I have the completed, written Word of God. We might be listening for the sound of the trumpet that calls us to assemble in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17), but in the meantime, the measure of our faith is how we respond to God's Word.

Now at this point, the people begin their journey through the wilderness. We read:

They set out from the mount of the LORD [Mount Sinai] three days' journey. And the ark of the covenant of the LORD went



before them . . . and the [pillar of] cloud of the LORD was over them. (Numbers 10:33-34)

What an exciting day this is. And let me tell you, from all appearances here, the people are starting out really well. But then in chapter 11 we are told in verse 1, “The people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes.”

Now we’re not told what those misfortunes were. Perhaps some cattle had died or the weather was hot, or life was just generally difficult, but they aren’t happy and they complain. Keep in mind they are actually complaining about God, who is leading them.

The Lord deals with the complaint severely. Verse 1 tells us, “His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.”

Unfortunately, this discipline from the Lord doesn’t eliminate their complaining, resentful attitude. Frankly, it’s going to travel with them throughout their entire journey. It’s even going to set a pattern for much of what follows here in the book of Numbers. I wonder about your journey today, beloved—is complaining the pattern for your life?

Well, this attitude shows up again here in verse 4, where we read, “Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving.” And who is this “rabble”? They are non-Israelites who left Egypt along with Israel (Exodus 12:37-38); they had appeared interested in following the God of Abraham, but most of them really weren’t interested in Him at all.

Evidently, the rabble gets everybody else craving the same things they crave, so we read the words of “all the people of Israel” in verses 4-5:

“Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt . . . the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength

is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Instead of being thankful for God’s presence and His miraculous manna, the people think only about what they don’t have: “Oh, we don’t have any more fish and sauteed onions and cucumber salad to eat. All we have is this manna.” It’s no wonder we read here in verse 10, “The anger of the LORD blazed hotly.”

And the Lord isn’t the only one hot with anger. Moses lets loose here with his own complaints to God about his job. In verse 11, he asks, “Why have you dealt ill with your servant?” In other words, “Why did You put me in charge?” Then he asks, “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?” (verse 13). In verse 14, he breaks down and says, “The burden is too heavy for me.” And finally, in verse 15, he says in despair, “If you will treat me like this, kill me at once.” In essence, he saying, “Lord, I would rather die than go one more day listening to two million people complain.”

How about you? Perhaps you’re leading a ministry—maybe even pastoring a church—and you’ve just about had it. Your service seems unnoticed and unappreciated, and the burden is blinding you to the benefits. It’s more than you can handle.

I love the way the Lord responds so graciously to Moses, telling him to appoint seventy men from the elders of Israel (verse 16), and then saying, “And they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone” (verse 17). So, the Lord gives him people, not just to serve with, but to talk to—people who will understand the unique burden of leadership.

With that, the Lord responds graciously to the nation, giving them the meat they crave. Verse 31 reads, “Then a wind from the LORD sprang up, and it brought quail from the sea and let them fall beside the camp.”

Not a shot is fired, but there are quail falling from the sky in this miraculous provision. So, do the people thank the Lord and confess their rebellious hearts? Not at all.



Verse 33 tells us:

While the meat was yet between their teeth . . . the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague.

The Lord disciplines His people for their rebellion.

With that, chapter 12 opens with another kind of complaint. This time it comes from Miriam and Aaron, the brother and sister of Moses. We read in verses 1-2:

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married. . . And they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?”

Moses’ wife Zipporah evidently had died, and Moses married another woman, from the region of modern-day Ethiopia.¹ Miriam and Aaron aren’t too happy about the marriage, and they use it as an excuse to complain about Moses having the leadership role in Israel. They don’t like the fact that he’s sitting in the driver’s seat.

This is a power struggle, but it sounds so spiritual. “Hey Moses, aren’t we just as special to God as you are?” Let me tell you, this is nothing less than a jealous grab for power.

The Lord appears in the cloud, and in verses 6-8 He vindicates the leadership role of Moses. Aaron is hu-

miliated publicly for his pride. Miriam is covered with leprosy, evidently because she was behind this attempted coup d’etat—this grab for power.

It’s only after Moses prays for her in verse 13, that Miriam is healed. And, unsurprisingly, there is no record of Miriam or Aaron ever again attempting to take the reins of leadership away from Moses.

Here’s the lesson: In your church, in your place of work, in your heart, leave no room for jealousy but always plenty of room for humility.

What heart-attitudes typically set the stage for your complaining against God? Why is complaining about your hardships so offensive to the Lord? Considering God’s response to Israel, what should your attitude toward hardships be, and why?

How do these verses (Proverbs 11:14, 15:22, 24:6) inform your thinking and motivation to ask the LORD to provide others to serve along with you whatever your leadership role may be?

What does complaining about circumstances in your life reveal about: your relationship with the Lord? Your devotion to living out God’s word? How much Satan is influencing your heart? Your priority to share the gospel with your family, friends and neighbors?

¹ Herbert Lockyer, *All the Women of the Bible* (Zondervan, 1967), 114, 181.

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WHEN OBSTACLES GROW BIGGER THAN GOD

Numbers 13–14

God calls us to trust His promises and consistently live in accordance with them. He doesn't ask us to examine His promises in light of the current situation and determine whether we should believe them and act on them. This was Israel's fatal mistake.

The nation Israel is knocking on the door of the promised land. Here in Numbers chapter 13, they are in the wilderness of Paran at the southernmost edge of Canaan. Just imagine the anticipation of finally stepping into that land God had been promising them for centuries—a land flowing with milk and honey *has* to be a great place to live!

But keep in mind that God is not going to hand them the land on a silver platter. He's not just delivering the land to them; He wants to develop their faith in Him.

Numbers 13 begins with these words:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe . . . you shall send a man." (verses 1-2)

After listing their names and the tribes they represent, Moses sends these spies out with these instructions:

"Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, and see what

the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land." (verses 17-20)



Kadesh Barnea region



And off this handpicked search team goes for what would be nearly a five-hundred-mile round trip.¹ I suspect a planning committee is already working on the welcome-home-heroes party. The team travels through the desert of the Negeb in the south to Rehob in the north. In verse 23, we are told they stopped in a place near Hebron in the southern part of the country to get a cluster of grapes so big that “they carried it on a pole between two of them.”

After forty days, the spies return and in verse 27 begin their report to Moses: “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey.” In other words, they affirm that the land allows the herds to flourish and give plenty of milk and the honey from the date palm tree nectar is abundant. This land is flowing with milk and honey. And as they hold up that huge cluster of grapes, the people are ready to start the celebration!

But in verse 28, the report takes a dark turn: “However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large.” Fear immediately ripples through the crowd.

Then Caleb, one of the spies, steps forward in verse 30 and says, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” We learn a little later that one other spy, Joshua, stands with Caleb. But they’re in the minority.

The other ten spies talk about the giants in the land. They report here in verse 31, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” And in verse 33 they declare, “We seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers [compared] to them.”

By the way, forty years after this, a harlot of Jericho, a woman named Rahab, will inform the Israelite spies that her people had been terrified by the news that Israel was entering the land, led by their almighty God. But look at the people of Israel here; they’re comparing themselves to the giants in the land, rather than comparing the giants to their unfailing, all-powerful creator God.

It becomes clear here in chapter 14 and verse 1 that the people ignore Caleb and Joshua and listen to the majority report. In fact, the congregation begins to weep, and they cry all night long. As far as they’re

*They’re comparing
themselves to the
giants in the land,
rather than
comparing the giants
to their unfailing,
all-powerful creator
God.*

concerned, there are nothing *but* obstacles in the land, and all of them are bigger than God!

So we read in verses 2-4:

All the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Joshua and Caleb tear their clothes in anguish over the people’s rebellion and deliver this incredible declaration of faith in verse 9: “Do not rebel against the LORD . . . do not fear the people of the land . . . the LORD is with us.”



But the people are unmoved. In fact, verse 10 tells us they want to stone Joshua and Caleb to death. But their plans to murder these two men and choose a new leader instead of Moses are suddenly interrupted by a spectacular appearance of “the glory of the LORD.”

Then in verse 12, the Lord says to Moses, “I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.” In other words, He’s saying, “Let’s start over.”

Now, understand that while this offer is a genuine expression of God’s anger, it’s also a test for Moses; and Moses passes the test by interceding for his rebellious flock. This is a good example for every parent and every leader who’s tempted to throw in the towel and quit.

Moses stays the course. In fact, he argues that if God destroys Israel, it will give cause for the Egyptians and the Canaanites to mock God as unable to fulfill His promises.

This is exactly what the Lord wanted to hear from His servant Moses—a greater passion for the glory of God than for the ministry God had given him. And that’s a warning to us today: it’s possible for us to care more about the ministry and the reputation of the minister than we do about the reputation of our Master and Lord.

So, God withdraws His threat of annihilation, but He announces some very serious consequences for the people because of their rebellion against God and refusal to enter the promised land.

First, all the men twenty years and older are responsible for this decision. Therefore, they will die in the wilderness and never see the promised land. Caleb and Joshua are the only exceptions.

Second, all the children will have to wait forty years before they have the opportunity to enter the promised land.

Third, as we read here in verse 37, the ten spies who championed the obstacles and led the people into

disobeying the Lord died immediately by a disease sent from the Lord.

And finally, when some of the people realized the mistake they had made and tried to enter the promised land, the Lord did not go with them. Consequently, they suffered defeat in battle.

One author points out the lesson here for us all, noting that faith is obeying God in spite of how we feel or what we see, even if all we can see are obstacles—obstacles the size of giants! The Lord delights in doing wonders for those who trust Him. ²

This is the same lesson taught by that old hymn of the faith, written in 1887:

*Trust and obey,
For there’s no other way,
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.* ³

What promises of God are most precious to you? Why is it important to keep a full supply God’s promises ready on your heart to claim? Why does Satan work so steadily to distract you from God’s promises and His fulfillment of them?

What resources has God already provided you to help assure that your response to obstacles in life are like Joshua and Caleb’s rather than the other ten spies? What heart attitudes help us see life’s obstacles as divinely provided opportunities?

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Counted* (Chariot Victor Publishing, 1999), 55.

² Wiersbe, 62–63.

³ John H. Sammis, “Trust and Obey.”

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PROMISES, LEADERS, AND PRIESTS

Numbers 15–17

Israel's sad example reminds us that God's love and compassion are steadfast. He does not withdraw His promises or change His plans when we rebel against Him but patiently urges and waits for our repentance and gives us all we need to follow and serve Him.

Israel's rebellious spirit against God and her God-appointed leaders in the wilderness tells us a lot about sinful human nature. God's responses to their rebellion tell us a lot about God.

In our last study, we watched as Israel rejected the opportunity to enter and take possession of Canaan despite God's promise to give them the land. Every Israelite twenty years old and upward was held responsible, and God sentenced them to wandering in the wilderness a total of forty years, during which time all of them will pass away.

If you do the math—and we can only make a rough guess, based on the census in chapter 1—a little more than one million people will die in the wilderness. That's some 25,000 people a year. Israel's forty years wandering in the wilderness was one long funeral.

Even though this is devastating news, and Israel has every reason to be distressed, God has not abandoned them. In spite of the death rate—and even more rebellion—God graciously gives them three very important reaffirmations here in Numbers 15 through 17.

Just listen to the opening verses in chapter 15: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the

land you are to inhabit, which I am giving you . . .'" (verses 1-2). Stop, and think about what the Lord is saying here. He hasn't changed His mind. He is effectively *reaffirming His promise to the nation*. It might be decades away, but it's already been decided—they will enter the land.

God now moves on in this chapter to restate various portions of the law He gave them at Mount Sinai. In verses 3-5, the Lord says to them:

*"[When] you offer to the LORD
from the herd or from the flock . . .
[you shall bring] a grain offering
. . . and you shall offer with the*



Relief showing Queen Hatshepsut burning incense to honor a god



burnt offering, or for the sacrifice, a quarter of a hin of wine for the drink offering for each lamb.”

All these instructions emphasize the *fellowship* elements of the sacrifices. A portion of these food items are actually shared among the priests and the people bringing the sacrifice. They’re having a little picnic out here, and this emphasizes the Lord’s grace and communion with His people.

Now beginning in verse 22, the Lord summarizes some of the laws that were laid out back in Leviticus. Why repeat them here? Again, this new generation will need to know what to do when they realize they have sinned. Hopefully, they will not be like their parents who were slow to confess.

So, the invitation here to seek forgiveness is loud and clear. We read in verse 25: “The priest shall make atonement for all the congregation . . . and they shall be forgiven.”

The word *atonement* appears three times in verses 25–29. This is God’s way of communicating that forgiveness is available *if* they approach Him through His plan of a substitutionary sacrifice. The methods may have changed today, but the solution is still the same—we now have forgiveness for our sins through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

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Chapter 15 wraps up with the Lord’s instruction in verse 38 “to make tassels on the corners of their garments.” That might seem a little strange, but this practice was designed to serve as a continual reminder to follow the word of God.

Now in chapter 16, the Lord not only reaffirms His promise to the nation; He also *reaffirms His leaders for the nation*.

A Levite named Korah, along with two accomplices and a rebel alliance of 250 men, comes to Moses and Aaron and delivers this complaint in verse 3:

“You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy ... and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”

This complaint sounds like Miriam and Aaron’s back in chapter 12, but this one is far more serious. The Levites among Korah’s supporters are tired of hauling around the tabernacle furniture as the assistants to the priests. They don’t want to just set up the tabernacle; they want to *run* the tabernacle. They want to belong to the priesthood. But they make their case in such a clever way here. They accuse Moses and Aaron of wanting glory for themselves. Notice, they say, “Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly?” In other words, why are *you* in charge around here? Well, if Moses defends himself, it will only look like he is as hungry for glory as they are.

So, Moses hands it all over to God. He falls on his face in prayer (verse 4). Then in verse 5, he tells Korah and these men to come to the tabernacle the next day with burning censers. Everyone will stand before the Lord, and in verse 7 Moses says, “The man whom the LORD chooses shall be the holy one.” He is simply saying, “We will let God clear up the matter. God will show us His answer.”

And the next day, they all come. Korah arrives with his two ringleaders and the 250 men who want to be



in charge of the tabernacle worship—and effectively, in charge of the nation Israel.

Now in verse 24, Moses warns the people not to come near the tents of Korah and his two ringleaders, who are now standing at the doors of their tents with their families. Verses 31–32 then give us the chilling, eyewitness account of God’s judgment:

The ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah.

Verse 35 also records that “fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.”

God reaffirms the leadership of Moses!

Now you would think that such a spectacle like this would be enough to put the fear of God in everybody. But the very next day, verse 41 says, “The people of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron, saying, ‘You have killed the people of the LORD.’”

Imagine that: “You, Moses, killed these people!” How in the world can they say that when the ground opened up and fire came forth from the Lord?

Immediately, God sends an epidemic raging through the camp. It ends only when Aaron runs through the camp with an offering of incense to make atonement for the people.

God will use the people’s rebellion, not only to reaffirm His chosen leadership for the nation, but also to *reaffirm Aaron as His appointed high priest for the nation*. Here in chapter 17, the Lord tells Moses to have Aaron and the leaders of Israel’s twelve tribes bring their staffs to Moses with their names written

on them. All the staffs are placed before the Lord in the Most Holy Place.

Verse 8 tells us that the next day, when Moses brings out all the staffs, Aaron’s staff has miraculously budded, and fresh almonds are literally hanging from what was a dead piece of wood. This public miracle puts the Lord’s stamp of approval on the high priest He has chosen.

The office of high priest was not subject to a power grab or the result of an election. God *chose* the high priest. And this is so important because Israel’s high priest foreshadows our one and only, divinely chosen Great High Priest, God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And let me tell you, when you’re connected to Him, you’re no longer a lifeless stick. You are a living spirit, a child of God on your way to heaven.

Why is fervent prayer a wiser choice than complaining when it comes to leaders you think are inadequate? How is choosing not to encourage a leader a form complaining? Why is it important for you to encourage the godly leaders the Lord has or is using in your life?

What elements of God’s character do you see revealed through His responses to Israel’s rebellion? How do these qualities comfort you? Which of them cause you some alarm to check your heart? Explain why.

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ORGANIZED WORSHIP

Numbers 18–19

God's instructions to Israel in Numbers 18–19 emphasize two important principles relevant to His people in every age. We must follow God's revealed order and fill the roles He has for us in His body; and we must always seek purity and holiness in our relationship with Him.

Every church, every family, every organization, and every nation face moments of crisis. Sometimes they challenge the plans or the structures or the leadership involved.

The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church that problems arise in the church so that those who are mature and genuine will be recognized (1 Corinthians 11:19). A crisis has a way of developing a family or a nation, and that's exactly what's happening in the life of Israel.

In our last study, in Numbers chapter 16, we watched the divisive men led by Korah try to wrestle leadership away from Moses and Aaron. The Lord put an end to the rebellion by taking the lives of Korah and his conspirators. God also judged by a plague the people who defended the rebels and accused Moses and Aaron of murder.

And in Numbers chapter 17 the people reacted in fear and said to Moses in verses 12-13: "Behold, we perish . . . we are all undone. Everyone who comes near . . . to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die. Are we all to perish?" In other words, they're asking, "Is the Lord going to get rid of us and start over?"

Well, chapters 18–19 answer their questions. We're going to see here that God informs them of what is needed in order to approach Him without fear of judgment and death.



Sesostris here holds the kherp scepter

First, the people need to *accept God's organization for worship*. Korah was a Levite—an assistant to the priests—but he wanted the role of priest. He wanted the privileges that belonged to Aaron and his sons and therefore tried to take over a role that did not belong to him. So, in chapter 18, the Lord clarifies the roles of the priests and the Levites.

The Lord begins by speaking directly to Aaron in verse 1:



“You and your sons and your father’s house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary . . . you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood.”

Aaron and his family have special responsibilities for Israel’s worship and the “sanctuary”—that is, the tabernacle. They are to represent the people before God. Without them interceding, the nation has every right to fear the judgment of God.

The Lord continues in verse 2, saying to Aaron:

“Bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi . . . that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.”

Now the Levites are not priests, but according to verse 6, they are God’s “gift” to Aaron and the priesthood, assistants to the priests. The priests and the Levites are to minister together, but they’re to respect the boundaries that define their offices.

Now what the Lord says in verses 8 through 20 here in chapter 18 has already been stated back in Leviticus. It’s repeated here to remind both the priests and the people of Israel that they are dependent on each other. The people bring the sacrifices and offerings, and a portion of them become the paycheck, so to speak, for the priests.

The Lord says to the priests in verses 9-10:

“This shall be yours of the most holy things, reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs, every grain offering of theirs and every sin offering of theirs and every guilt offering of theirs, which they render to me, shall be most

holy to you and to your sons. In a most holy place shall you eat it.”

In other words, these offerings became their supper. Now, down in verse 21-22, the Lord speaks to the Levites about some new regulations:

“To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.”

The Levites not only assisted the priests, but they literally protected the people from becoming too careless in their approach to God. And the tithes of the people become, again, their personal paycheck.

All these regulations set forth here in Numbers 18 offer safeguards for the nation. When the people recognize their role in Israel’s worship and follow what God has organized for them, they have no reason to fear His judgment.

The priests, aided by the Levites, represent the nation before the Lord, leading them to find forgiveness and blessing. And as the people follow God’s plan for worship, their sacrifices and financial gifts end up providing for the physical needs of the priests and Levites.

So, there is this wonderful interdependence. The people rely on the priests and Levites, and the priests and Levites depend on the people.

Here is a good lesson for us: As we follow God’s arrangement for marriage and family and work and ministry, we not only discover joy and fulfillment, we more than likely take care of other people in the process.

The first principle here in chapter 18, then, is that the nation needed to accept God’s organizational plan. Second, they needed to *accept God’s demand for purity*.

In chapter 19, God lays out the laws for purification. We already saw back in Leviticus chapter 11 that any contact with a deceased animal or human rendered



*As we follow God's
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someone unclean and unable to worship in the tabernacle until proper cleansing took place.

Obviously, God has some good hygiene in mind here for the people, but more importantly this serves as a reminder that God is holy and must be approached in holiness.

The Lord says here in verse 13:

*“Whoever touches a dead person,
the body of anyone who has died,
and does not cleanse himself, de-
files the tabernacle of the LORD,
and that person shall be cut off
from Israel.”*

This isn't a new regulation, but it's emphasized again. Why? Well, keep in mind that since the people will be in the wilderness for a total of forty years because of their refusal to follow Joshua and Caleb's counsel, an entire generation is in the process of dying—at a rate of 25,000 people a year. As I have already said, their forty-year wandering was nothing more than a forty-year funeral procession.

So, Numbers chapter 19 begins with the Lord's instructions for removing the uncleanness caused by contact with a corpse. Among other things, this involves the sacrifice of a red heifer “outside the camp” (verse 3).

The body of the heifer is to be burned and its ashes collected and mixed with water. Verse 9 calls this, “the water for impurity for the congregation of the people of Israel.” This water is to be applied to those who are unclean due to touching a dead body. Then after a seven-day quarantine, they are pronounced clean, and returned to life as normal, including being allowed to worship again in the tabernacle.

Now we need to understand that this particular cleansing establishes in the hearts of the people a growing *anticipation* for a permanent cleansing that will bring unbroken restoration to true worship.

How is that going to happen? In God's plan, an unblemished sacrifice will be offered outside the camp once and for all, and all who accept that sacrifice—of the Lord Jesus Christ—will be *permanently* cleansed and restored to fellowship with God.

How do you support and complement the spiritual leaders God has given you? Consider going to them and humbly asking if they feel supported or how specifically you can support them. How does assuming leaders feel or are supported play into Satan's hands?

What specific spiritual disciplines currently contribute most to your pursuit of spiritual purity? Why do they work so well for you? Which don't, and why? What value is it to yet to be saved friends and family for you and your close believing friends to talk about purity as a lifestyle?

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SERPENT ON A POLE

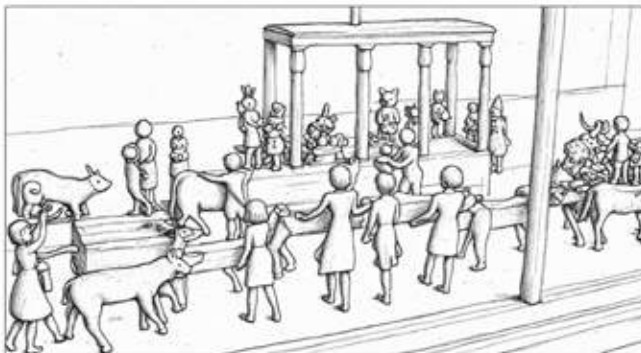
Numbers 20:1–21:9

Every generation must answer for their own response to the Lord. As the new generation in Israel neared the promised land, they were given living lessons on the importance of obedience, faith, and righteous living. These principles equally apply to us today.

After years of wandering, the nation Israel has now come full circle back to the region of Kadesh. This was the place where they had refused to enter the land, following the report of the twelve spies. And that refusal had led to forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

Here in Numbers chapter 20, we are told that the siblings of Moses die—Miriam, his sister, in verse 1; and Aaron his brother, in verse 28.

Now follow me here: Over in Numbers 33:38 we're told that Aaron dies in the fortieth year after Israel left Egypt. So, as we now arrive at Numbers chapter 20, which records Aaron's death, we know that Israel is nearing the end of their wandering. A new generation of Israelites are within sight of the promised land!



Drawing of a model of a livestock count

If you are like me, it's often at times when you're aware of God's blessing that you tend to slack off and maybe even drift away from where you should be. And as hard as it is to believe, that's exactly what happens to the people of Israel. Here in Numbers chapters 20 and 21, several events take place. And together, they become a powerful teacher of how to keep from drifting away from where we should be in our walk with God today.

Let's allow the nation of Israel to teach us four important lessons today.

Lesson number 1: Pride can have painful consequences.

We read here in verses 2-3:

Now there was no water for the congregation. . . . And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD!"



This sounds familiar, doesn't it? The new generation sounds a lot like the old generation. Indeed, they're following that same old pattern of grumbling here.

In verse 8 the Lord speaks to Moses:

“Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”

Now note carefully what Moses says and Aaron does when they go before the people in verses 10-11:

Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and [Moses] said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly.

Let me tell you, Moses is defying the word of God here. God told him to *speak* to the rock, and Moses *strikes* it—*two times*! Aaron goes along with it.

And the Lord pronounces judgment on both of them here in verse 12:

“Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

Israel will enter the promised land without Moses and Aaron leading them.

Now this judgment might seem harsh unless you understand that what Moses did here was take credit for something only God could do. Notice, Moses said, “Shall *we* bring water for you out of this rock?” There was no *we* involved here—there was only God. All Moses had to do was speak to the rock, and God would have provided a miraculous fountain of water.

Moses was effectively stealing glory from God and striking the rock implied that it was according to his power that water came forth. With great pride, he acts as if he is manufacturing this miracle rather than it being by the power of God. And the tragic consequence of his pride is this judgment from God: He will not lead the people into the promised land.

Lesson number 2: Trust as you follow the Lord's timing.

Here's a positive lesson learned in verse 14. Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom, requesting permission to travel through his territory; and the answer he receives is, “Absolutely not!” So, with that denial, verse 21 says, “Israel turned away from [Edom].”

Now you might expect Moses to remind Edom that Israel is the chosen people of God and nobody is going to boss them around. But instead of doing that, Moses and the people of God trust the Lord's timing. This, by the way, means a long detour around Edom,

Look to Jesus, the one who hung on the cross dying for us, the one who took the venom of sin on Himself.

but they trust the Lord's timing and take the detour.

Lesson number 3: Dependence on God should be daily.

Following the death of Aaron as chapter 20 comes to a close, chapter 21 opens by telling us, “The king



of Arad, who lived in the Negeb . . . fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.”

What he doesn't know is that this new generation of Israelites aren't about to ignore this. The nation cries out to God here in verses 2-3:

*“If you will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.”
And the LORD heeded the voice of Israel and gave over the Canaanites, and they devoted them and their cities to destruction.*

The new generation isn't without fault, but when facing this enemy, they give themselves fully to the Lord. They trust Him in this battle; and let me tell you, beloved, this victory is going to become a foretaste of their conquest of Canaan.

Lesson number 4: The object of your faith is what matters.

Now on the heels of this great victory, Israel turns south to go around Edomite territory—and that old Israelite attitude resurfaces again in verse 4: “The people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses.”

The Lord responds in verse 6, by sending poisonous snakes into the camp, and people start dying from the venomous snakebites. Now to their credit the nation immediately repents, and they say to Moses in verse 7, “We have sinned . . . Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.”

Instead of removing the snakes, however, the Lord instructs Moses to make a bronze replica of a snake and put it on a pole and plant it where all the people can see it. Verse 9 explains, “If a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.”

Here's the cure: Whoever is bitten by a snake needs to *believe* the object being lifted up is God's cure. God wanted their deliverance to become a matter of faith; so, if the person bitten by a snake believed God and looked to that bronze serpent, he would be healed.

Did you know that over in John's Gospel, Jesus uses this Old Testament event to illustrate His own death, when He's going to be lifted up on a cross? Jesus said, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14-15).

You and I have been fatally bitten by our sin, and death is certain. For all of us, death is just around the corner. So, what's the cure? Look to Jesus, the one who hung on the cross dying for us, the one who took the venom of sin on Himself. Believe in Him, and you will be saved from everlasting death and judgment and saved to everlasting life and joy in Him.

This is God's eternal cure. So, look to Jesus; trust in Jesus alone, and you will one day live with Him forever.

Why is trusting God's timing such a challenge? What must you assume about God in order to trust His timing? Why is it important to let your yet to be saved friends and family see you trusting God's timing?

Why is living out your dependence on God important for unbelievers to see and hear from you (Matthew 5:16)? Who has God placed in your life to watch your dependence on Him? In what ways is the LORD calling you to grow your faith and dependence on Him?

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BALAAM AND A TALKING DONKEY

Numbers 21:10–25:18

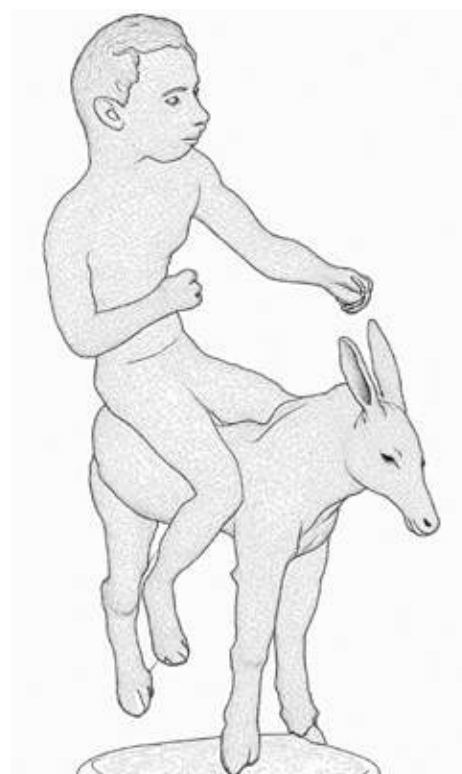
The opposition to God’s chosen people Israel came in many forms. The same is true for us. Our enemy continually seeks opportunities to discredit, distract, and destroy us. We can never rest in our successes and let our guards down.

As we sail from chapters 21 through 25 of the book of Numbers in our Wisdom Journey, we are going to see some impressive military victories for the new generation of Israel.

Standing between the Israelites and the land of Canaan—the promised land—are the hostile nations known as the Amorites and the Moabites. Now the Israelites aren’t looking to pick a fight with these nations; they just want to pass through their territory along the way. We are told in verse 21 that “Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, ‘Let me pass through your land.’”

Sihon answers this peaceful request by getting his army ready to fight. But verse 24 records, “Israel defeated [Sihon] with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land.”

Then from farther north in Bashan comes a king by the name of Og—even his name sounds menacing, doesn’t it? Well, this wicked king, Og, comes out to fight the Israelites. But in verse 35, we read again, “[Israel] defeated him and his sons and all his people.” And with that, Israel now has control of much of the land east of the Jordan River.



Figurine of man on donkey reminiscent of Balaam

But this is no time to bask in their victories and hand out trophies. They need to stay on the alert because watching all this are the Moabites.

Now in chapter 22, we read in verses 2-3, “Balak [Moab’s king] saw all that Israel had done to the Am-



orites. And Moab . . . was overcome with fear of the people of Israel.”

Let me tell you, Balak, could have begged God for forgiveness and left the people of Israel alone. Instead, supported by his allies the Midianites, he goes after a well-known pagan prophet—a practitioner of the dark arts—a man who dabbles in the occult; his name is Balaam.

And Balak sends a wagon load of money to Balaam, along with messengers to tell him here in verse 6, “Come . . . [and] curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me.” He wants Balaam to use his devilish power to put a curse on Israel.

Now beloved, this doesn’t mean some voodoo practitioner can put some kind of curse on you and ruin your life or exercise some secret power over you. Let me tell you, the powers of darkness are real. but they are on a leash and can do nothing apart from God’s permission. Remember, the Bible tells us, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

*“He who is in you is
greater than he who
is in the world”*

(1 John 4:4).

Balaam is smart enough to know that Israel belongs to the true and living God. And so, he asks God for His direction. We’re not told how God communicates to Balaam; we’re just told Balaam gets the message that there’s no need to try to put a curse on Israel. God says to him here in verse 12, “You shall not go with them [the Moabites]. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

So, Balaam refuses Balak’s offer and sends this committee home. But King Balak is not going to give up so easily; so, he sweetens the pot and effectively sends

Balaam a blank check. He’s saying, “You name the price, and we’ll pay it.”

This time the Lord tells Balaam, “Go with them; but only do what I tell you” (verse 20). Balaam, however, is secretly motivated by the allure of all this money. Other passages of Scripture tell us the Lord was angered by Balaam’s greed (2 Peter 2:15). So, the Lord sends Balaam a warning—and it’s delivered in a rather unusual way. Look at verse 22: “The angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as [Balaam’s] adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey.”

Balaam doesn’t see the angel, but verse 23 tells us that *his donkey* sees “the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand.” The donkey tries to avoid the angel, but every time he moves to the right or left, Balaam smacks him with a stick.

Finally, the terrified donkey just lies down in the middle of the road. God then miraculously gives the donkey a voice, and the donkey says to Balaam, “‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ And Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a fool of me’” (verses 28–29). Balaam is actually arguing with a donkey without stopping to say, “Hey wait, this donkey is talking to me!” I think Balaam’s head was thicker than the donkey’s.

In verse 31 we read:

*Then the LORD opened the
eyes of Balaam, and he saw the
angel of the LORD standing in
the way . . . And [Balaam] . . .
fell on his face.*

The Lord repeats His message in verse 35, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” That message seems to finally get through, because when he comes to Balak in verse 38, Balaam says, “The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.” In other words, he’s going to be as smart as that donkey was and speak only the word that God puts in his mouth.



Now in chapters 23 and 24, Balaam is taken to three different locations by this Moabite king who is trying everything he can to get Balaam to curse Israel. But every time, Balaam refuses and instead speaks words of blessing God has placed in his mouth.

In fact, God uses Balaam to offer some amazing truths about God and His chosen people Israel.

For instance, here in chapter 23 and verse 19, Balaam says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.”

But most amazing is the statement he makes in chapter 24 as he prophesies of the coming Savior, saying in verse 17, “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” The King—as indicated by a royal scepter—will one day rise from the sons of Jacob—that is, from the nation of Israel.

So, God uses both a donkey and a false prophet to communicate His message!

Now the tragedy here is that while Balaam is unable to curse Israel, he introduces Balak to another strategy to defeat God’s chosen people. And this ends up being more successful than some kind of hocus-pocus, phony curse.

Chapter 25 opens with that strategy:

The people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

Some of the Israelite men begin immoral relationships with the women of Moab and accept their invitation to engage in their idolatrous feasts and worship. Numbers 31:16 reveals that this was instigated by Balaam,

and we read in Revelation 2:14 that Balaam “put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.”

Israel’s rebellion is so severe we’re told here in Numbers 25 that God orders the execution of these immoral men, and He sends a plague among the people to bring them to repentance.

There’s a lasting lesson here. Our study began in chapter 21 with obedience and victory, and by the time we reach chapter 25 Israel is disobedient and defeated.

This is a warning to every believer today. The devil is relentless. When one strategy fails, he tries another one. Let’s walk with God today.

How would you describe Balaam’s heart? How should we relate to people who share his spiritual perspective and at the same time fulfill our mandate to make disciples for Jesus? (Matthew 28:18-20). Who is the “Balaam” in your life?

What attributes of God are highlighted when He uses even wickedness to bring about His own glory? How might you use the Balaam events to explain to an unbeliever how God relates to wickedness and why He is worthy of worship through faith in Jesus?

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REMINDERS OF GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

Numbers 26–31

To consistently follow what God says, we must have an accurate understanding of who God is. God is revealed to us in the Bible and quite often through His acts recorded there. God's acts in Numbers 26–31 reveal a number of important and impressive attributes of God.

There's an old saying that actions speak louder than words. That's certainly true. And even though God has spoken clearly through Moses here in Numbers 26–31, God is going to speak loudly to a new generation of Israelites through His actions. And His actions are going to reveal some truths about His attributes.

For instance, here in Numbers chapter 26, God's people are reminded that the Lord is *faithful*. God speaks to Moses and Eleazar, the new high priest, in verse 2:

“Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war.”

Now this was the same instruction the Lord gave at Sinai years earlier in Numbers chapter 1. You might remember that this book is entitled Numbers—from the Greek word *arithmoi*, which gives us the word *arithmetic*. This book opens and closes with a census—it's a book of numbers.

And this final census here indicates that the Lord is preparing His people for conquest. This new generation of Israelites are standing on the threshold of the promised land, which is a testimony that God is faithful in keeping His promises.

Now over in chapter 27 you could write the words, the Lord is *fair*. Here you find the five daughters of Zelophehad coming to Moses. Their father had died without a male heir, and they have no inheritance in the land.

So, in verse 4 they plead their case: “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers.”

There is no law governing this kind of case, so Moses goes to the Lord. In verse 7 the Lord answers:



Wall drawing of a deity conferring authority on Pharaoh



“The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their [uncles] and transfer the inheritance of their father to them.”

God didn’t make a mistake that He’s now trying to fix. This event is recorded in history to make the point that the Lord is compassionate and fair.

There is another critical step in preparing Israel for entering the land, and that’s appointing a successor to Moses. This action reveals that God is *wise*.

The Lord tells Moses to go up on a mountain, where he can see the land the Lord is giving Israel. Then in verse 13, He says to Moses, “When you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people.” The Lord will allow Moses to see the land, but He will not allow Moses to enter the land because of his earlier disobedience.

But Moses makes this request of the Lord in verses 16-17:

“Let the LORD . . . appoint a man over the congregation who shall . . . lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.”

And the Lord appoints Joshua to succeed Moses. There is obvious wisdom in choosing Joshua. He’s the courageous spy who had wanted to go into the land and defeat the giants forty years earlier! And then he was chosen to receive leadership training on the job as the assistant to Moses during the forty years of wilderness wandering.

In verses 22-23, we see a public ceremony:

[Moses] took Joshua and made him stand before Eleazar the

priest and the whole congregation, and he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the LORD directed.

Joshua is now officially Moses’ successor as Israel’s leader.

The divine instructions that follow reveal another truth about God—that He is *relational*. All the offerings recounted here in chapters 28 and 29 simply reveal the wonderful truth that the Lord wants a close relationship with this new generation of Israelites.

Here we find again God’s directions about daily offerings (Numbers 28:1-8); the Sabbath offerings (verses 9-10); monthly offerings (verses 11-15); and then finally the annual offerings, which include the special Passover offerings (28:16–29:40).

Listen, God is repeating all of this because He wants to remind the nation that He is not an inaccessible God; He is a relational God. He isn’t withdrawn; He is welcoming.

He wants to remind the nation that He is not an inaccessible God; He is a relational God. He isn’t withdrawn; He is welcoming.

This is true, not just for the nation, but also for *individuals* whose faith is active and obedient. So here in chapter 30, guidelines are given for making vows to the Lord. Verse 2 says:

“If a man vows a vow to the LORD . . . he shall not break his



word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”

Now the point of *this* chapter is to warn the Israelites that breaking a vow hinders their relationship with God. Again, this emphasizes that God doesn't want to be isolated; He wants to be involved. And that's still true today, in your life and mine.

In chapter 31 we are given the revelation that the Lord is *just*. The Lord tells Moses in verse 2: “Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites.”

You may remember how Balak, the Moabite king attempted to curse Israel and then, on Balaam's advice, lured them into idolatry and immorality. The Midianites had joined Moab in attempting to destroy Israel. Well, this is payday for them all.

We are told here that Israel goes to war against them and the results of that war: “They killed every male. They killed the kings . . . And they also killed Balaam,” that false prophet (verses 7–8).

Israel is acting on God's behalf to carry out *His* justice. Now the world doesn't like this attribute of God. But God is not only compassionate; He is also just, and in the end, according to the Word of God, judgment will be delivered on the world of humanity. And only those who have run for shelter in Jesus Christ will escape the coming wrath and holy justice of God.

I am reminded again of one of our country's founding fathers, who once said, “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that His justice will not sleep forever.”

Now as we move through chapter 31, we are reminded that God is also *holy*. Here in verses 13–24, God sets forth the proper ritual for purification from uncleanness. This isn't just about good hygiene and washing your hands and behind your ears before supper. Ritual uncleanness is a symbol of sin. And those

who have been made ritually unclean through warfare need cleansing.

This illustrates the truth that our sin needs to be forgiven; we need cleansing in order to have fellowship with a holy God. This is a picture of the coming, cleansing sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who reconciles us to a holy God.

Now the final act here in chapter 31 reminds us that the Lord is *worth praising*. In verse 48, the officers of the army come to Moses with a huge offering of gold jewelry taken with the plunder. And they say in verse 49, “Your servants have counted the men of war who are under our command, and there is not a man missing from us.” This is a gift of gratitude for what God has done, and it comes from every soldier.

And this is where you end up when you walk in obedience with God and discover that He is faithful, fair, wise, relational, just, and holy. What can you do but praise Him?

Why is it important for you personally to regularly take the time to ponder and celebrate God's attributes? What attributes of God can your yet to be saved friends and family see and hear from your life?

How is the message of the gospel affected when we let God's grace and mercy not stand equally beside His holiness and justice? Why do we sometimes let these qualities get out of balance?

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LEARNING FROM THE LEADERSHIP OF MOSES

Numbers 32–36

Too many people fail to heed the lessons of the past, are consumed with the concerns of the moment, and give little thought to the future. Moses is a commendable model of one who wisely learns from the past but is engaged in the present and focused on preparing for the future.

Moses is approaching the end of his life as we come to the last chapters in the book of Numbers. Here Moses provides for us a model of humble, godly leadership. We can observe three exemplary elements of his leadership in these closing chapters, and they relate to Israel's present, past, and future.

As we begin in chapter 32 of Numbers, we find Moses confronted with a *present* concern by way of an

unexpected request. The tribes of Reuben and Gad have found that the pasturelands east of the Jordan River are perfect for their large herds of livestock, so they come to Moses in verse 5 with an appeal: "Let this land be given to your servants for a possession. Do not take us across the Jordan."

Now Moses is concerned immediately that they might walk away from God if they don't cross over into the promised land with the other tribes. He's also concerned that the rest of the nation will suffer in battle without their help.

But these tribes promise Moses they will indeed cross over and go to war with the rest of Israel, until all the promised land is conquered and settled (verses 17-19). Moses agrees but then warns them here with words you may have heard, like I did, growing up (my mother often quoted it to me): "Be sure your sin will find you out" (verse 23). In other words, God will hold them accountable if they don't keep their promise.

And with that, Moses turns to the *past* and reviews Israel's history. In fact, in most of chapter 33—the first forty-nine verses—Moses talks about Israel's journey through the wilderness, and he highlights the grace



A figurine of a Hittite god



of God in bringing the people through these forty years to the front door of the promised land.

Then, in verse 50, the narrative shifts from Israel's past to Israel's *future*. In fact, the remainder of the book of Numbers focuses on Israel's future in the land.

First, in verse 52, Moses commands the nation as they enter the land, "Destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places." That is, "Don't leave anything lying around that will tempt you to walk away from God."

Chapter 34 then looks ahead to the settlement of the land, and the Lord begins by giving Moses the outer boundaries of the land He has given Israel.

The western border is the Mediterranean, or Great Sea. The eastern border is the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee) and the Salt (Dead) Sea, along with the Jordan River that connects them. From the Sea of Galilee, the border extends farther to the east and northeast. The southern border extends from the southern tip of the Dead Sea to the "Brook of Egypt," which connects with the Mediterranean. The northern border

*But one day they
will possess it all
when they accept
Jesus as their
Messiah and He
reigns in the coming
millennial kingdom!*

is difficult to define but apparently includes the Hermon Mountain range, modern-day Lebanon, and much of modern-day Syria.

Let me tell you, the land God promised Israel is a much larger area than they have *ever* possessed. But one day they will possess it all when they accept Jesus

as their Messiah and He reigns in the coming millennial kingdom!

Added to all this, of course, are the lands to the east that already have been given to Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh.

In the second half of Numbers 34, the Lord gives Moses the names of specific individuals who will assist Joshua and the high priest, Eleazar, in dividing the land among the various tribes.

What's interesting about all these instructions is that they *assume* Israel's possession of the land. The land is as good as theirs. The Lord said back in chapter 33, verse 53, "You shall take possession of the land . . . for I have given the land to you to possess it." The land already has been *given* to them; they just need to act in faith and take possession of it.

Now in chapter 35 the Lord says to Moses here in verse 2, "Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in." Once Israel is established in the land, the Levites are to be given forty-eight cities in which they can dwell. Unlike the other tribes, Levi is not given a land inheritance; they are going to be scattered throughout the land in these forty-eight cities so that everyone will be living near Levites, who can instruct them in God's law and the requirements for worshipping the Lord.

In addition, six of these forty-eight Levitical cities are called cities of refuge. In verses 11-12 the Lord says:

*"You shall select cities to be cities
of refuge for you, that the man-
slayer who kills any person with-
out intent may flee there. . . .
that the manslayer may not die
until he stands before the congre-
gation for judgment."*

If someone accidentally kills another person, he is to flee to one of these cities to be protected until he can stand trial. Now a murderer isn't likely to flee to a city



of refuge since he won't be protected when he's found guilty. He's just going to be on the run and hoping he can outrun the "avenger" (verse 12). An avenger is someone designated by the murder victim's family to track down the murderer and deliver justice.

From verse 16 through the end of chapter 35, a number of scenarios are presented to help Israel determine whether a death was premeditated murder or accidental manslaughter. The guiding principle is set forth in verse 30:

"If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses. But no person shall be put to death on the testimony of one witness."

Justice must be served, but God wants Israel to make sure nobody is convicted of murder on the testimony of a single witness. There must be plenty of evidence, otherwise somebody might be wrongfully accused. There is to be no hasty judgment but careful examination of the evidence and the testimony of multiple witnesses.

Let's move on to chapter 36, where Moses is presented with a problem concerning the land. Back in chapter 27, the daughters of Zelophehad requested an inheritance in the promised land since their deceased father had no sons. And Moses agreed.

But now some tribal leaders from Manasseh raise the question about women who receive inheritances like this but then end up getting married to men from other tribes. That means the land will transfer to another tribe, creating confusion down the road about the true ownership of tribal lands.

Moses delivers a response from the Lord here in verse 6: "Let them marry whom they think best, only they shall marry within the clan of the tribe of their father." This restriction prevents the transfer of land from one tribe to another. And Zelophehad's daughters, we are told in verse 10, "did as the LORD commanded Moses."

So, throughout these closing chapters of the book of Numbers, the wise leadership of Moses is on display. He is dealing with problems in the present, while reminding people of God's faithfulness in the past, and preparing them to walk with God into the future. That is a great model for leaders to this very day.

How has this promise, "Be sure your sin will find you out" been fulfilled in your life? Why are wisely telling such stories useful to breakdown and unbeliever's resistance to trusting in the gospel? Who in your life might you wisely share your experience with to bring them closer to accepting Jesus as Savior?

What concerns of God are at the heart of the establishment of the Levitical cities and cities of refuge? How does your life reflect these same concerns? How might those concerns be used to share God's heart for people, to your yet to be saved friends and family?

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