

EXODUS: Lesson Ten, The Fortieth Year of Wandering ***Numbers 20 – 36***

Subject: The Israelites approached Canaan, took the Transjordan, fell prey to Balaam, and planned their land division.

Main Idea: Like the Israelites, we are inconsistent at best, but God remains faithful.

Principles:

1. *The wise person learns from their failures rather than remaining defeated and discouraged.*
2. *“If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12).*
3. *God is faithful, even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13).*

Introduction

In the last lesson, we learned that the Israelites rebelled against the Lord by refusing to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. The Lord had made a promise to their forefather Abraham that included the land. It was a gift He intended to give Abraham’s descendants. But out of fear, disbelieving God would enable them to take it, the Israelites refused to enter. As a result, He sentenced them to forty years of wandering in the wilderness until the last of the generation of grown men who had come out of Egypt had died. God said that He would give Canaan to their children instead.

In this lesson, we find the older generation of Israelites dying out and the younger generation coming of age. In the final year of their wandering, as they moved closer to the land they would claim, they experienced tragedies as well as triumphs. While they had great hope and anticipation concerning the Promised Land, at the end of Numbers, it is clear that this generation was no more deserving of God’s blessing than their parents had been. At times they acted courageously, but they were inconsistent at best. They repeated a number of their parents’ serious mistakes. Nevertheless, despite their failings, they were about to inherit the land of Canaan.

How many things have you enjoyed, today alone, that you have really done nothing to deserve? Have you earned the air you breathe? Have you done something that entitles you to be able to taste, to smell, to feel, to see, or to hear? Have you ever considered listing all the things you enjoy for which you can take no credit?

It’s easy for me to criticize the Israelites, to look back at their failures and wonder how they could have disbelieved God after all He had done for them. How could they have grumbled so frequently? Then I look at my own life and realize that I may not be much different. Rather than confessing my grumbling spirit, I call it being realistic. Instead of naming my sin disbelief, I claim I’m being cautious. And yet God has been unspeakably good and generous to me. I am inconsistent at best, but He is ever faithful. The overall message of Numbers is that God remains faithful to His promises, even though His people are unworthy.

I. Tragedies and Triumphs En Route to the Plains of Moab

– Numbers 20-21

A. The Fortieth Year – 20:1

- i. When in Israel’s Wandering? Trying to place the events of Numbers 20 has presented scholars with some challenges. Numbers 20:1 refers to the “first month” without giving the year.
 1. It took the Israelites about three months to travel from Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 19:1), where they remained for almost a year. By allowing some travel time between Sinai and Kadesh (Numbers 12:16; 13:26), where the Israelites sent spies into Canaan and rebelled against God, the Israelites likely arrived at Kadesh, on that first occasion, approximately two years after they left Egypt. The Israelites wandered for another thirty-eight years after arriving at Kadesh (Deuteronomy 2:14), until all those adults twenty years and older of the first generation out of Egypt were dead.
 2. Numbers 20 opens with the community returning to Kadesh (verse 1). At least one of the events recorded in chapter 20 occurred in the fortieth year of Israel’s wanderings (Aaron’s death, according to Numbers 33:38) and most likely Edom’s refusal to give Israel passage through her land (Deuteronomy 2:2-14). Therefore, the “first month,” referred to in Numbers 20:1, is traditionally understood to be the first month of the fortieth year since the Israelites left Egypt.
 3. There are 37-38 years about which very little information exists. Sometime during these years, Korah’s rebellion seems to have occurred. God gave Moses the Laws recorded in Numbers 15-19, and Deuteronomy 29:5 tells us that the Lord continued to provide for the Israelites while they wandered.
 4. All the events recorded between Numbers 20 and the end of Deuteronomy occurred in the fortieth year after Israel had left Egypt. (Moses led the Israelites from the time he was 80 years of age until he died at age 120. See Acts 7:23, 30, 36; Deuteronomy 34:7.) Some argue that the events of the fortieth year began in Numbers 20:14 and that Miriam’s death and Moses’ disobedience occurred at the beginning of the third year.ⁱ

- ii. Place of Miriam's Death: Numbers 33 records a long list of unknown locations to which Israel traveled from the time they left Egypt until they arrived on the plains of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan River. However, the Biblical stories about Israel's journey largely center around three locations: *Sinai*, where Israel was forged by God into a nation, *Kadesh* (in the Desert of Paran/Zin), where Israel sent out spies and subsequently refused to enter Canaan, and *the plains of Moab* (east of the Jordan River), where the younger generation prepared to enter Canaan. Miriam died in Kadesh. Assuming Miriam died early in the fortieth year and since this was also the place where Israel refused to enter Canaan thirty-eight years earlier, perhaps Kadesh served as a kind of base camp for the Israelites during their years of wandering.

B. Moses' Rebellion and Aaron's Death – 20:2-13, 22-29

- i. Israelites' Thirst: Once again, the Israelites grumbled about not having water. The situation mirrors the event in their first year out of Egypt, recorded in Exodus 17. After all these years of witnessing the Lord's provisions, the Israelites still had not learned that God is faithful and would meet their needs.
- ii. Moses' Sin: God told Moses, "Speak to that rock... and it will pour out its water." Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses and Aaron said to the Israelites, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (20:10). Moses then struck the rock twice. The Lord passed a severe judgment on Moses and Aaron that day by removing their privilege of leading the Israelites into Canaan. Commentators have sought an explanation for the severity of this judgment. There are three possibilities.
1. Moses was angry at the Israelites on this occasion (Numbers 20). His anger had also flared up in the past. At age forty, he had killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite (Exodus 2:11-12). When he saw Israelites worshipping the golden calf at Sinai, "his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces" (Exodus 32:19). Perhaps this was the Lord's judgment on an ongoing anger issue with which Moses struggled.
 2. Another suggestion is that Moses disturbed a visual of the Gospel, since 1 Corinthians 10:4 speaks of Christ as the "spiritual rock" that accompanied the Israelites and from which they drank. God had instructed Moses to strike a rock from which water flowed in the Desert of Sin (Exodus 17). Roughly 39 years later, He directed Moses to speak to the rock (Numbers 20). At Calvary, Christ was stricken, a one-time event. Since Christ's crucifixion, living water has been available from Him for the asking.

3. Even if God had never intended this visual, Moses had disobeyed (20:8, 11). Many scholars agree that Moses displayed arrogance by taking God's role in judging the Israelites as "rebels" and by implying that it was by his and Aaron's *own* power that water could come from the rock ("Must *we* bring you water out of this rock?" 20:10). Perhaps this was the sin for which they were judged.
 4. Although Moses' punishment seems severe, he was no ordinary man. He spoke to God "face to face" (Exodus 33:11, Numbers 12:8). Aaron was also highly privileged. Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much will be required" (Luke 12:47, 48). Moses and Aaron were well acquainted with God's ways. They had been entrusted with representing the Lord to the Israelites, who were already struggling to trust in the Lord's faithfulness. For such men to fail to "honor [the Lord] as holy in the sight of the Israelites" and "trust in Him" (20:12) was a serious matter indeed.
- iii. Aaron's Death Atop Mount Hor – 20:22-27: The community traveled from Kadesh to Mount Hor, where the Lord announced Aaron would die. Moses himself died later the same year. Both died as a result of their failure to honor the Lord in the incident of the rock. Yet God graciously allowed them other privileges at the end of their lives. Aaron was allowed to see the mantle of the High Priesthood passed to his son Eleazar just before his death and Moses was permitted to climb Mount Nebo where the Lord showed him the land Israel would inherit (Deuteronomy 34:1).

C. Edom's Refusal to Allow Passage to Israel – 20:14-21: As the Israelites sought to move from the south to the east of Canaan, the most direct route would have taken them through Edom. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, Jacob's (Israel's) twin brother. According to Deuteronomy 2, the Lord instructed the Israelites not to provoke the Edomites. The Israelites were also told not to provoke the Ammonites and Moabites, the descendants of Abraham's nephew Lot. The Lord had given these people groups their land and Israel was not to attempt to take it. Israel wanted to pass quietly through Edom, but Edom was afraid (Deuteronomy 2:4) and refused them passage. Therefore, the Israelites took a circuitous route to avoid trouble with Edom, their "brother" (20:14).

D. The Attack of the Canaanites of Arad - 21:1-3

- i. The Canaanites of Arad: A certain group of Canaanites, who resided not far from where the Israelites had been in the Negev, “heard” that Israel was coming (21:1), and attacked them. These were the very people (together with the Amalekites) who had killed some of the Israelites 38 years earlier when the Israelites presumptively attempted to enter Canaan, after they rebelled against the Lord (Numbers 14:45). Apparently, it was the first occasion on which the younger generation of Israelites faced the threat of war and they turned to the Lord for victory.
- ii. “Totally Destroyed”: The Israelites vowed they would “totally destroy” the cities of this Canaanite group (21:2). The Hebrew word translated “totally destroy” is *hāram*, meaning to devote to destruction, to put under the ban, or to consecrate for extermination. It may seem shocking to hear that God approved and even ordained the holy wars Israel waged (Deuteronomy 9:1-6), in which so many people were slaughtered. However, this was not a case in which the Lord merely nodded assent to the will of the Israelites. The judgment on the Canaanites was the Lord’s judgment. The Israelites were merely His instruments.
 1. *Not Israel’s Righteousness*: It was not carried out because the Israelites were more deserving of the land of Canaan or of God’s favor in any sense (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). God, in His complete wisdom, determined that the time had come for the wickedness of these nations to be judged.
 2. *God’s Patience and Judgment*
 - a. In Genesis 15, the Lord told Abraham that, in his day, the “sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure.” The Lord explained this was the reason He did not give the land to Abraham’s descendants sooner. God is patient. He delayed judgment over four hundred years before He took the Israelites out of Egypt and used them as His instrument of judgment on the Canaanites (Genesis 15:13-16, Deuteronomy 9:5).
 - b. It is known from history that the Canaanite (Amorite) people groups were so utterly decadent that even their own pagan contemporaries considered them unusually perverse. Yet God gave these people abundant opportunity to repent. All the people groups around Egypt had heard what the Lord had done in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and of His works of their behalf (Numbers 21:1, Exodus 18:1, Numbers 22:2-6; 33:40, Deuteronomy 2:4 and Joshua 2:8-11). He had proved His superiority over other gods when He judged the gods of Egypt. Additionally, the Israelites’ camp, laws, and

sacrifices were evidence to all the nations around them of Yahweh's unique and holy nature. Each people group *and each individual* had the opportunity to side with the Israelites and make the Lord their God (as a few, such as Rahab, chose to do [Joshua 2]). The King of Arad had this opportunity, yet he showed no fear of the Lord or respect for His chosen representatives.

- c. God is the righteous Judge of the Earth (Genesis 18:25, 1 Samuel 2:10, Psalm 94:2). His perfect justice demands that sin be punished and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 3:23). The real shock is not that God ordered the total destruction of the Canaanites, but that He allows *any* sinner to remain outside hell for even the smallest amount of time, that He patiently gives opportunity for repentance, and that He chooses to extend loving favor to those whom He redeems!
3. *The Threat if Judgment was Further Delayed*: It is important to remember that God had called the Israelites to be His holy representatives to all nations. If the Canaanites remained in the land, alongside the Israelites, their sin would become an obstacle to God's purposes for His people (Leviticus 18:24-28, 20:23; Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 18:9-13). As we will discover, this is indeed what eventually happened, as a result of Israel's failure to destroy all of the Canaanites.

E. The Bronze Snake – 21:4-9

- i. Israel's Sin: As the Israelites made their long trip around Edom, they became impatient and began to speak against God and against Moses. They complained about being in the wilderness. They complained about their diet. They complained about water shortages. They acted a great deal like their parents. The Lord disciplined them by sending venomous snakes among them.
- ii. God's Provision and Lesson: Upon Moses' intercession, the Lord told him to put a bronze snake on a pole. Anyone who was bitten and looked at it would live. The bronze snake had no power in itself to heal. The simple act of looking was God's unique provision for their healing, to teach that salvation comes by faith. In the same way, those who look by faith to Jesus' death on the cross for their salvation receive eternal life. Jesus said, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him” (John 3:14-15). Sadly, 2 Kings 18:4 says that Israel profaned this symbol later in her history by turning the bronze snake into an idol.

F. Defeat of Trans-Jordanian Kings – 21:10-35

- i. The Land of Sihon and Og: Once the Israelites finally made their way around Edom, they came through the land of the Moabites, to the area east of the Jordan River known as the Transjordan. A portion of this area that had formerly belonged to Moab was, at that time, occupied by Sihon, king of the Amorites (Numbers 21:26-30). Just north of the land Sihon had claimed, another Amorite king named Og ruled.
- ii. Israel's Victories: As they had done with Edom, Israel requested permission to merely pass through the land, but Sihon and Og, each in turn, marched out to meet Israel in battle. The Lord gave both of these kings and their armies over to Israel. The victories were significant for a couple of reasons. First, the Israelite tribes of Gad, Reuben and half of the tribe of Manasseh took this land as their permanent inheritance, rather than settling within the borders of Canaan. Numbers 32 records their pledge to assist the other tribes by crossing the Jordan River and fighting alongside them until all Israel claimed their inheritance. Meanwhile, with Moses' permission, they rebuilt the towns and cities in the Transjordan and settled their families, flocks and herds. Second, these victories (together with the earlier victory over the King of Arad) gave Israel great confidence that God would continue to fight on their behalf as they put their confidence in Him and His faithfulness.

Summary Statement: The Israelites were prone to impatience and complaining. It does not seem that they had learned much from previous failures in this particular area (Exodus 15, 16, 17; Numbers 11, 12, 14, 16, 20, 21). However, they did experience several military victories. Apparently, they did not allow their inconsistency to utterly discourage them. *Discouragement is one of the believer's greatest enemies.*

Principle: *The wise person learns from their failures rather than remaining defeated and discouraged.*

When we sin, the Holy Spirit is grieved and we will feel His displeasure. However, *once we repent*, we are forgiven, cleansed (1 John 1:9), and *no longer under His condemnation* (Romans 8:1). He does not leave us with a spirit of discouragement and timidity (2 Timothy 1:7) but with a sense of hope (Romans 15:13) in His power to make us victorious (Ephesians 1:18-20, Philippians 1:6, 2 Timothy 1:7, 2 Peter 1:3). On the other hand, we have an enemy, an “accuser” (Revelation 12:10), who works to keep us feeling defeated. Not all discouragement can be blamed on him (some of us excel at inwardly “beating ourselves up”), but we should beware that condemnation and discouragement are some of his favorite tactics. If he can successfully convince us to remain discouraged by our past failures, little effort is required on his part to sidetrack us in more obvious ways.

Illustration: When our children were growing up, we struggled to consistently have a family time of Bible reading and prayer. The older our children became, the more responsibilities and activities they had. It became difficult to find a time every day of the week when we were all together in one place at one time. Since our evening meal was the time we were most frequently together, we attempted to have a family devotional period right after it. We would be consistent for a period of weeks, but then something would regularly come up in the life of one or more family member that would interfere. We (parents) were so discouraged that we were tempted to just give up.

The New Testament illustrates our need to persevere by comparing it to running a race (1 Corinthians 9:24, 2 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 12:1). At some point, it occurred to me that the “race” we run is actually more like a marathon than a sprint in many ways. Falling in a sprint is disastrous, but falling in a marathon is only disastrous if the runner does not get back up again. We realized that if we gave up on having family devotions because of inconsistency, our children would lose all opportunity to benefit. If, however, we determined to return to it again and again, no matter how long it had been since we had last done so or how many times we had allowed an opportunity to pass by, our family would at least benefit in some measure.

An interesting thing has happened! As adults, our children have told us that they remember the example we gave them in having family devotions “every night”. Of course, we have had to admit to them that that was not the case, but their words prove that a victory was gained because we learned from our failures rather than becoming defeated by discouragement.

Application: From what recent failure can you learn a lesson? If you have sinned, do you find yourself discouraged, even after you have gone to the Lord and confessed it? If so, will you consider the source of your discouragement and choose to move forward in the Spirit of Hope and Power?

Transition: The Israelites experienced both triumphs and tragedies in the fortieth year of their wandering. At last, they arrived at the plains of Moab, directly across the Jordan River from the Canaanite city of Jericho. Two towns in the area are specifically named as being occupied by the Israelites, Shittim (25:1, 33:49) and Beth Jeshimoth (33:49). Numbers 22-25 records accounts in which Balaam blessed the Israelites and then led them into temptation. The events described in these chapters must have occurred in the final months of the fortieth year.

II. Tragedy and Triumph Involving Balaam – Numbers 22-25:

A. Balaam’s Failure to Curse Israel – 22-24: Balak, king of Moab, heard about Israel’s victories over the Amorites and was terrified. In fact, all the Moabite people were “filled with dread” (22:2), as were the Midianites, who were apparently also living in Moab at the time (22:4-7). Since military strength had failed other nations, Balak and the elders of the Midianites determined to try a different strategy. They called for Balaam, a renowned seer, to curse Israel (22:6). This was directly against God’s will, for God promised Abraham in Genesis 12:3, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.”

i. Balaam’s Character

1. Balaam was from Pethor, near the Euphrates River. In 1967, a Dutch archaeological team uncovered inscriptions written on a wall inside a temple that speak about Balaam, affirming that traditions about Balaam were well-known outside the Israelite community.ⁱⁱ “These texts have revealed the existence of a “complex cult of prophets and seers whose activities precisely resemble those of Balaam.”ⁱⁱⁱ
2. While at first it appears that the Bible paints Balaam in a favorable light, the incident with the donkey reveals that Balaam was actually seeking an opportunity to curse Israel (22:22, 34). The New Testament tells us that he was a wicked man, motivated by greed (2 Peter 2:15-16, Jude 11). Extra-biblical sources affirm this view. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that Balaam intended to comply with Balak’s wishes to curse Israel and Philo of Alexandria claimed that Balaam was even more eager to curse Israel than Balak.^{iv}

- ii. Balaam as the Lord’s Instrument: Balaam was the antithesis of the kind of person one would expect God to use. However, this is not the only place in the Old Testament where God revealed Himself to a pagan (Genesis 41:1-40; Daniel 2:17-19, 45). Normally, Balaam used cultic divination to gain insights through demons (Numbers 22:7, 24:1), a practice that is condemned by the Law of God (Leviticus 19:26). *But on these occasions*, the Lord interrupted his cultic practice and revealed Himself to Balaam! Balak sent emissaries twice before Balaam was willing to respond to his requests. On the second occasion, God gave Balaam permission to go with Balak’s men, with the condition that he would say *only* what the Lord told him to say.

iii. Balaam and the Donkey – 22:21-35

1. Since Balaam appears to have been cooperating with the Lord and was granted the Lord's permission to travel with the group, we are surprised to read in 22:21 and 34 that God was angry when Balaam went and opposed him along the way. The Lord's opposition can only be explained by considering Balaam's motive. He must have secretly hoped to reap a monetary profit from Balak, as Jude 11 suggests.
 2. The Angel of the Lord stood in the road with a drawn sword to block the progress of Balaam and his donkey. Although the donkey saw the Angel, Balaam did not. The Lord opened the donkey's mouth and it spoke to Balaam in an audible human voice! The lesson for Balaam was that if God could control the tongue of an animal, He could certainly ensure Balaam only said what He intended for him to say. The account ends with the Angel of the Lord speaking directly to Balaam, telling him that his path had been reckless (22:32), and insisting that Balaam "speak only what I tell you" (22:35). Obviously, Balaam's inward intentions had not matched his expressed compliance with God's will.
- iv. Three Opportunities: Balak brought Balaam to three different vantage points that overlooked Israel's camp (22:41, 23:13), from which he hoped Balaam would curse Israel. On the first two occasions, Balaam used divination (24:1), but when he found the Lord interrupting to give him words of blessing to speak over Israel, he did not bother to use his cultic methods on the third occasion. The Spirit of the Lord came over him and gave him the message to speak.
- v. Balaam's Fourth Message: Following the third blessing, Balak told Balaam to return to his home, that he would not be paid. But Balaam did not immediately leave. Rather, he prophesied a message concerning a future ruler, "a star" (implying royalty) that would come out of Israel, one who would conquer all Israel's enemies. This prophecy parallels that of Jacob, who had said that such a ruler would descend through his son Judah (Genesis 49:9-12). Thus, God used a pagan seer to prophesy concerning the future victories of King David and the ultimate triumph of the Messiah, David's greatest descendant. Balaam also spoke a series of prophecies concerning other people groups.

B. Balaam’s Successful Strategy – Numbers 25: The Moabites and Midianites had been unsuccessful in having Israel cursed. Therefore, they sought a different formula to bring about the Israelites’ destruction – one that was facilitated, and perhaps even initiated, by Balaam. 2 Peter 2:13-16 and Revelation 2:14 tell us that Balaam “taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.” According to Numbers 31:16, he advised the Midianite women to seduce them in this way. Sadly, they were successful and “Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor” (Numbers 25:3).

- i. Baal and Cultic Prostitution: Baal was an ancient fertility god, worshipped by many Middle Eastern people groups. The “Baal” worshipped by the Moabites living near the Israelite camp was known as “the Baal of Peor” (25:3, 5). Peor was one of the locations to which Balak had taken Balaam to overlook the Israelite camp. Temples or tributes to local deities were often built on such “high places.” Baal worship included cultic prostitution, a rite in which the worshippers imitated the intercourse of the gods with one another or with the priests and priestesses of Baal, believing Baal would then grant fertility to their fields and flocks and families. The practice was appealing, for it not only promised the participant increased power and success but also sexual gratification. God’s people were continually warned against intermarriage with nations that would lead them astray. The situation was a portent of the temptation and entanglement Israel later faced in Canaan, especially with regard to Baal worship.
- ii. The Lord’s Judgment: The Lord was angry and told Moses to kill the leaders (presumably either the leaders of the tribes, who were responsible for the Israelites’ behavior, or those within the camp who were encouraging the sin). While Israel was gathered before the Tabernacle weeping over their sin, the son of the leader of the Simeonite tribe, whose name was Zimri (25:14), brazenly brought a Midianite woman (named Cozbi, 25:15) into the camp, right through their assembly and into his tent, to have sex with her. Phinehas, son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron (and also possibly one the judges assigned by Moses to deal with the Israelite men involved in the sin, 25:5), was zealous for the Lord and drove a spear through the couple. Meanwhile, the Lord had sent a plague through the camp. Phinehas’ display of zeal ended it, but 24,000 had already died. “Presumably, this number included the rest of the older generation who were doomed to die in the wilderness (14:29), since the census that follows this incident expressly certifies”^v that the last of them had died by the time it was taken (26:64–65). Since the Midianites had led the Israelites into idolatry and immorality, the Lord instructed Moses that they were to be considered Israel’s enemies from that time forward.

- iii. Phinehas' Reward: Phinehas was rewarded for his zeal, just as the Levites had been rewarded for their zeal after the golden calf incident (Exodus 32:28-29). The Lord made a covenant with him, promising him and his descendants a lasting priesthood (25:13). Phinehas later served as high priest and was faithful throughout his life.

Summary Statement: The children of Israel were on the verge of laying hold of God's promise and entering Canaan when they lapsed into grave moral failure, repeating their parents' sin of idolatry (Exodus 32).

Principle: *"If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you do not fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).*

Just as Balak feared the Israelites, Satan also fears what God will do through His people. Balak and Balaam were tools of Satan, first attempting one strategy and then another, to lead the Israelites away from God and from His purposes for them.

Application: Have you, like the Israelites, recently determined to obey the Lord and claim one of His promises? Perhaps you've just experienced a spiritual victory, as did Israel when Balaam blessed them. When we think we are standing strong, when we are in a spirit of celebration, when we are most determined to obey: these are times to be especially careful that we do not fall prey to a temptation that we did not see coming.

Our enemy is cunning and will try many different schemes to defeat us. If you have recently decided to join a group where you receive Christian fellowship or determined to spend more time in God's word, you should expect to meet with various kinds of opposition. You will receive invitations to other good activities. An abundance of other distractions may come your way. You might find you suddenly cannot concentrate when you sit down to read your Bible or listen to someone teach it. On occasion, some may even develop a physical illness (Job 2:3-7 [physical infirmities result from the presence of sin in the world, but we should not assume that every illness is the direct result of a Satanic attack]).

The younger generation of Israelites was proving to be unworthy recipients of God's promises, but God is faithful. He is faithful still today. Immediately after Paul's warning to be careful that we do not fall as the Israelites did, the apostle reminds us of God's faithfulness when we face the schemes of the devil: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And *God is faithful*; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). When we do fall to temptation, as the Israelites did, God may discipline us. It is important that we do not resent His discipline, for since He loves us and only wants the best for us, it is also a mark of His faithfulness.

Transition: The Israelites were unfaithful, but God was faithful and would keep His promise to give them Canaan.

III. Final Preparations to Enter Canaan – Numbers 26-36: For the most part, the last eleven chapters of Numbers record instructions about the younger generation’s inheritance of the land and its division.

A. The Second Census – Numbers 26

- i. Who was counted? According to Numbers 26:64-65, immediately after the plague of Peor ended, the Lord ordered a census of the younger generation. Those twenty years old or more, who were able to serve in the army, were to be counted in preparation to enter the Promised Land of Canaan. Every man in the older generation had died before the census was taken, except Joshua and Caleb, just as the Lord foretold (Numbers 14:30). Presumably, the last of them died in the plague.
- ii. Purpose of the Census: It is possible that this census was ordered partly in consideration of the upcoming attack on Canaan, but preparation for the allotment of the land is the reason that is given (26:52-56). Larger portions of land were to be given to larger tribes and smaller portions to smaller tribes. Once again, this chapter records that the Levites were not to receive land as a tribe because of their special role. Rather, they were given parcels of land near prominent cities distributed throughout Canaan where they could serve in support of local communities.
- iii. The Totals: Since the first census, some tribes had decreased and some had increased, but overall, the population had not substantially changed. Any population growth would have been diminished by the plagues in which large numbers of Israelites died (Numbers 16:49, 25:9).

B. Inheritance for Zelophehad’s Daughters – Numbers 27:1-11 and Numbers 36

- i. The Question: Numbers 27 and 36 record a special case, which would serve as a precedent in determining land inheritance. What should happen if a man died without a son to inherit his property? If he had a daughter, could the daughter inherit her father’s land? This was the question of Zelophehad’s family, a man of the older generation who had died and left five daughters but no sons.
- ii. God’s Answer: Moses brought the case before the Lord and received His answer. Numbers 27:8-11 and 36:4-9 record these laws. The land was to be a permanent inheritance within each tribe. No inheritance was to pass from one tribe to another (36:7, 9). If land was sold, it was returned to the original family in the Year of Jubilee, so that no piece of property ever permanently transferred from one tribe to another tribe (36:4). If a man who had no son died, his land was to be given to his daughter. If he had no daughter, it would pass to the deceased’s brothers. If he had no

brothers, the land went to the nearest relative within his clan. Finally, if a daughter inherited land from her father, she had to marry within her father's tribal clan to prevent the land from becoming the property of a different clan or tribe.

- iii. A Precedent: In the Old Testament and the New, the Bible raised the standard with regard to treatment of women, paving the way for the equality of which Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

C. Joshua Named As Moses' Successor – Numbers 27:12-23: The younger generation was about to enter Canaan, but since Moses had lost the privilege of leading them in, the time of his death was approaching. The Lord blessed him with several privileges before he died. Two of these are recorded in Numbers 27:12-23.

- i. View the Land: The first privilege the Lord gave Moses was to climb a mountain in the Abarim Range (Mount Nebo, according to Deuteronomy 32:49), from which he would be able to view the land of Canaan stretched out below. This event is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.
- ii. Commission His Replacement: The second privilege was Moses' commissioning of his replacement. Although Joshua had been Moses' assistant for years, Moses did not presume to make this appointment on his own but asked the Lord for the leader of *His* choosing. He requested the Lord appoint someone who would act as a shepherd to the "sheep" of Israel (27:17). The Lord told Moses that Joshua was the man for the job. From this account, we learn wise lessons about replacing leaders. Just as Moses had been training Joshua for years, each believer should be actively discipling others to, one day, replace them. However, the final decision is God's and must come through prayer. He may appoint someone trained by the very person who is leaving his or her post, as he did with Joshua, or He may appoint a person who has been trained under the leadership of someone else. Moses did as the Lord instructed. He brought Joshua before Eleazar the High Priest, laid hands on him, and commissioned him.
- iii. Farewell Speeches: The Lord also granted Moses the privilege of giving farewell speeches to Israel before his death. These are recorded in the book of Deuteronomy.

D. Laws About Sacrifices and Vows – Numbers 28-30

- i. Timing in Giving these Laws: The Lord ordered the census, gave instructions about the division of the land, and ordained a new leader for the Israelites in preparation for their entrance into Canaan. Numbers 28-29 records offerings that were to be given in connection with the many required sacrifices. Giving these laws at this time encouraged the Israelites that their entrance into the land was imminent. “In a single year the priests should offer 113 bulls, 32 rams, 1086 lambs, a ton of flour and a thousand bottles of wine and oil!”^{vi} The vast number of required animals indicated possession and prosperity in the land. Although those entering the land were of a new generation and their leader was a new leader, God’s provision through sacrifices was unchanged.
- ii. Order of the Listed Sacrifices: The offerings are listed according to the major divisions in the Hebrew calendar: daily offerings, weekly Sabbath offerings, monthly offerings, and offerings brought for the special celebrations of Passover, the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles.
- iii. Vows: Chapter 30 addresses the obligation to keep vows, a topic related to the sacrifices, since vows were usually made as part of worship and sacrifice at the Tabernacle (later, the Temple). Men and women alike were required to keep their vows. An exception was the case where a woman’s husband or father, the authority figure in the home, objected to the vow as soon as he heard about it.

E. The Midianites Killed – Numbers 31: The Lord told Moses to destroy the Midianites for having deceived and seduced the Israelites at Peor (Numbers 25). God takes any threat to his children’s welfare seriously. Numbers 31 records Israel’s battle against them. Balaam was among those killed in battle (31:8). Apparently, this was a local war against a particular Midianite group because the Midianites remained a powerful people group even after Moses’ time. As a personal sign of gratitude that not one of their men was killed in the battle, the officers brought an offering from their own plunder to thank the Lord.

F. Eastern Tribes Receive Inheritance – Numbers 32

- i. The Request: The tribes of Reuben and Gad had especially large herds and flocks. Since the land formerly occupied by Sihon and Og was very suitable for their livestock, these tribes asked Moses, Eleazar, and the community leaders if they might settle in this land. Moses was concerned because the Transjordan lay outside the land God had promised to Abraham. Furthermore, their request might discourage other tribes from entering Canaan, thereby evoking the Lord’s anger, as their fathers had done.

- ii. Promise of the Transjordan Tribes: The Reubenites and Gadites assured Moses of their willingness to fight for Canaan alongside the other tribes. Until the time came, they wished to build fortifications for the safety of their families and flocks. After Moses received this commitment, he granted their request. The half-tribe of Manasseh, which included the clans of Makir and Gilead (26:29, 32:39-40), settled there with them.

G. Review of Journey – Numbers 33: Chapter 33 gives a travel log, listing many places that are not recorded earlier. Of primary interest is the departure from Egypt (verse 5), the Israelites' arrival at Sinai (verse 15), their arrival at Kadesh (verse 36 [with no mention that they spent thirty-eight years wandering in the vicinity]), and their arrival at the plains of Moab (verse 50), where they remained until they entered Canaan. As if to keep Israel from becoming too focused on the past, the travel log is immediately followed by God's reminder to drive out all the inhabitants of Canaan and to distribute the land evenly according to the size of each tribe (verses 50-56). Failure to drive the inhabitants out of the land would lead to trouble for Israel. As it turns out, these warnings foretell the exact course of Israel's history. Israel's failure to drive out all the Canaanites and their intermarriage with local people ultimately resulted in God's judgment and Israel's removal from the land.

H. Boundaries of Canaan – Numbers 34: This chapter draws geographical boundaries for the land to be inherited by Israel, emphasizing that the land was a gift from the Lord (verses 2, 13, 29). Joshua and Eleazar, the High Priest, were to assign the land (34:17) with the assistance of a leader from each tribe. We rejoice to see Caleb listed as the leader from the tribe of Judah who was given this responsibility (34:19)!

I. Towns for Levites and Cities of Refuge – Numbers 35: This chapter again relates to the land as an inheritance. Although the Levites were not to possess entire tracks of land, they were to be given forty-eight cities of their own, with surrounding pastureland for their flocks and herds. Of the towns they were given, six were to be designated "cities of refuge." The punishment for murder was death. A member of the victim's family, known as "the avenger," was responsible to act on behalf of society by taking the murderer's life. Those who killed another person could flee to one of these six cities for safety prior to their trial. Thus, the six cities needed to be well distributed throughout the land. If it was determined by trial that the death was a result of manslaughter, the individual was to be detained within the city of refuge until the death of the high priest. If the individual left the city, they had no protection from the avenger. These laws helped ensure the land the Israelites were about to inherit was not defiled, since the Lord was going to dwell there among them (35:33-34).

Summary Statement: The younger generation of Israelites had a great many things to anticipate. Several tribes were already settling in the east and soon the rest would finally have their own land across the river in Canaan.

As they considered the events of the past twelve months, the spiritually sensitive among them must have experienced a great sense of gratitude for what God was about to do. They had been inconsistent, at times lapsing into complete moral failure. They were no more deserving than their parents had been. But God was faithful. He was keeping His promises.

Principle: *God is faithful, even when we are faithless (2 Timothy 2:13).*

Conclusion

The hopeful tone with which the book of Numbers ends is a result of God's faithfulness, not Israel's success. In fact, the Biblical record is the story of His faithfulness. So, I ask again, have you ever considered keeping a personal record of God's faithfulness to you, even in the common graces of life and breath? I've found this to be a very helpful spiritual discipline in my own life. Focusing on my unfaithfulness (and the unfaithfulness of others whose decisions and actions impact me) can be deeply discouraging. But as I keep my eyes on God's faithfulness, I'm continuously filled with hope. I believe Jeremiah understood this when he wrote:

I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember *them*,
and my soul is downcast within me.
*Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:*
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for His compassions *never fail*.
They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness
(Lamentations 3:19-23 [my emphases])

That summarizes the overall message of Numbers. God was faithful then, He is faithful today, and He will be faithful tomorrow. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him (Romans 15:13).

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- ⁱ Milgrom, J. (1990). *Numbers* (p. 164). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- ⁱⁱ Milgrom, J. (1990). *Numbers* (p. 476). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Merrill, E. H. (1985). Numbers. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 241). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.
- ^{iv} Milgrom, J. (1990). *Numbers* (p. 471). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society.
- ^v Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 215, as quoted by Cole, R. D. (2000). *Numbers* (Vol. 3B, p. 442). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- ^{vi} Wenham, G. J. (2003). *Exploring the Old Testament: The Pentateuch* (Vol. 1, p. 116). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.