

EXODUS: Lesson 9, Exploring Canaan and Aftermath ***Numbers 1 – 19***

Subject: The well-ordered Israelites left for Canaan but rebelled and never entered the Promised Land.
Main Idea: The Christian life is a pilgrimage with tremendous spiritual blessings to be inherited, both along the journey and at our journey's end.

Principles:

1. *We cannot experience the fullness of life God offers us without practicing the disciplines of peaceful and well-ordered living.*
2. *We cannot inherit the Promised Land of fullness in Christ without regularly exercising faith.*

Introduction

One of the great Christian classic works of literature is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an allegory by John Bunyan about a man named Christian, who leaves his old life behind and begins a journey that ends in the Celestial City. It is a picture of the spiritual journey of each believer in Christ from the moment of our salvation until we reach heaven. It depicts the many challenges, victories, difficulties and joys that we encounter in the Christian life.

The story of the children of Israel in the books of Moses gives us a similar picture. Bunyan's account is allegorical, while the Bible is historical. Although no human work can be compared to God's own word, both Bunyan's story and the books of Moses offer encouragement and warnings for the life of faith.

The Israelites' journey from enslavement in Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan is a picture of Christian pilgrimage. Our spiritual journey begins, as theirs did, with redemption. Christ accomplished our redemption from the death penalty we owed when He died on the Cross. When we repent and receive Him as Savior and Lord, our journey begins. We are traveling toward the Promised Land, that is, the fullness of life God offers us in Christ in this life and ultimately, the reward of heaven. Our pilgrimage is the process the Bible calls sanctification, in which we become increasingly Christ-like. It is a process that never ends this side of heaven. With each step of maturity in Christ, we inherit another piece of the Land of Promise, the riches of life in Christ. What we inherit in this life are not material riches but spiritual riches. Nevertheless, these spiritual riches lead to an exceedingly satisfying life. The journey is often difficult (John 16:33), but we should find ourselves making progress, as we know our God and His good ways better and better and embrace them.

As we discover in this week's lesson in the book of Numbers, the first generation of Israelites out of Egypt rejected the Promised Land and never inherited it. Perhaps you know some people who claim to belong to Christ but never seem to have much of His life within them. They lack the identifying marks of a person who lives near the riches of the Promised Land. In fact, one would hardly guess that they have entered into a life of peace, a life of rest from self-dependence, because they persist in patterns of complaining and fear. They exhibit little of God's wisdom. Only on a rare occasion will they speak of victory over sin because, frankly, they live as though they are defeated.

The Christian life is a pilgrimage with tremendous spiritual blessings to be inherited along the journey and at our journey's end. Sadly, too many people who call themselves "Christians" experience little of the Promised Land God offers. In this lesson, then, we will discover what the biblical text tells us about why this happens.

I. Introduction to the Book of Numbers

A. Title: The Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is "In the Wilderness." It is also known as the Fourth Book of Moses. "Numbers" is a title that was given by its Greek translators, because of the censuses it records. Although several are recorded, especially in the first chapters, there are two that stand out because they reflect the major incident in the book. The first of these two censuses was a count of fighting men, age twenty or older from the generation of Israelite adults that left Egypt. The second (in chapter 26) was a census taken of the fighting age men (twenty and older) from the succeeding generation, nearly forty years after the first census.

B. Contents

- i. Place in the Larger Story: By examining the dates given, we see that the book of Numbers records events that began just one month after the setting up of the Tabernacle in the Israelite camp at Sinai, recorded at the end of Exodus (Exodus 40:2, Numbers 1:1). In a sense, Leviticus interrupts the larger story of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land to insert important ceremonial instructions. Numbers picks up the story where Exodus left off. As the book opens, Israel is still camped at Mount Sinai. Numbers covers history that occurred over a 38 to 39-year period of time (Numbers 1:1, 20:28, 33:38; Deuteronomy 1:3).
- ii. Outline and Subject Matter:
 1. The book can be outlined as follows:
 - a. Preparation to depart Sinai for Canaan (1:1-10:10)
 - b. Years of wandering (10:11-19:22)
 - c. Second generation journeys to plains of Moab and anticipates entering Canaan (chapters 20-36)
 2. Numbers is a book of great hope and a book of great failure.
 - a. The first ten chapters record days of great anticipation as the Israelites finally prepared to leave for Canaan after nearly a year at Mount Sinai. The middle section of the book tells of the failure of the generation that left Egypt to enter the Promised Land. The last part of the book is, again, a time of hope as the second generation of Israelites prepares to enter Canaan.
 - b. The entire book tells of military victories and military defeats.

- c. It tells of the deaths of Miriam, Aaron, and their entire generation (except for two men); foretells Moses' death; and presents the exemplary faith of Caleb and Joshua in contrast to the utter failure of the other spies to trust God.
- iii. Themes: Many themes found elsewhere in Scripture are also present in Numbers:
 1. The concepts of unbelief and rebellion against God, and of sin resulting in consequences, grief, and ultimately, death
 2. The idea that great faith is usually only found in a minority of people
 3. The notions of hope for the future and anticipation of receiving God's promises
 4. The truth that God is faithful, despite our unfaithfulness, always keeping His promises

C. Similarity to Exodus: Numbers is sometimes compared to the Book of Exodus. Both books contain a mix of instructive material (Law/"Torah") and narratives. Both recorded the celebrating of Passover. Both give accounts of the Israelites' grumbling. Finally, both books tell of Israel's rebellion (the golden calf incident in Exodus and Israel's refusal to enter the Promised Land in Numbers), followed by God's threat of destruction, Moses' intercession, and God's punishment (the Levites' purging of the camp in Exodus and the sentence of life in the desert in Numbers).

Summary Statement: Our *Exodus* study covers the book of Numbers in two lessons before moving on to the final book of Moses, Deuteronomy.

II. Preparation to Depart Sinai for the "Promised Land" – Numbers 1:1-10:10

A. Censuses Taken and Tribes Arranged – Numbers 1-4

i. Background

1. Israel spent approximately three months getting from Egypt to Sinai (Exodus 19:1). While at Sinai, the people had entered into a covenant relationship with God, received His law, government, format for worship, and God's presence in their midst within the Tabernacle. At Sinai, the large people group of the Hebrews was forged into the nation of Israel, but they were still a nation without a land of their own.

2. The story in Numbers begins on the first day of the second month of the second year after Israel left Egypt (1:1, 18). Israel had been camped at Sinai for over eleven months, and movement of the camp was imminent (chapters 1-10). Because they were sure to face war, the fighting men were counted, responsibilities were assigned, the manner in which they were to break and reset the camp was described, and they were told when to break camp and when to stop traveling
- ii. Census of Fighting Men – Numbers 1:1-44
1. *Numbers by Tribe*: Numbers 1 records the results of the first census, in which all men of fighting age (twenty years and older) were counted, by tribe. We notice that Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, are counted as separate tribes since the Patriarch Jacob (also known as “Israel”) adopted Joseph’s two sons as his own (in essence, granting Joseph the double portion of inheritance normally given to the firstborn son). Thus, even with the Levites excluded, the number of tribes still total twelve.
 2. *Controversy over the Figures*: The total number of men of fighting age was 603,550. With a conservative estimate of three women and children for every one fighting man in the camp, Israel’s total population would have been well over 2 million. Some estimate it as high as 6 million. This number has caused no small amount of controversy among Bible scholars. Some insist that these figures must be taken literally. Such a large number would certainly have explained Pharaoh’s fear of the Israelites’ population multiplying too rapidly and overtaking the Egyptians. However, even among conservative scholars, a good many think the figures that appear in our Bibles represent very unlikely numbers and may have been mistranslated.
 - a. As of 2003, the population of Bedouin in the Sinai Peninsula is about 5,000. Prior to modern methods of agriculture, the land would not have been able to support more than a million people.ⁱ
 - b. Other scholars point out that at this time in history, the entire Egyptian army was not likely to have had more than 20,000 members and the population of Canaan would have been well below 3 million. This makes it hard to explain why Israel would not have easily overthrown their Egyptians oppressors and why Deuteronomy 7:6-17 indicates too few in number to occupy all of Canaan (also Exodus 23:29-30).ⁱⁱ

- c. Other logistical problems exist if the number is accurate. For example, one person calculated that a narrow path through the Red Sea would have necessitated a line of Israelites 800 miles long needing to cross in one night. Even if the path in the sea had been as great as three miles wide, the Israelites would have needed to walk 5,000 abreast in order to cross in one night.ⁱⁱⁱ
 - d. Several solutions have been suggested, the best of which seems to be that the Hebrew terms “thousand” and “hundred” may originally have referred to units, such as clans or families or military groups. If this were true, then the actual number of fighting men recorded in Numbers 1 could be closer to 5,000 with the total population being near 20,000 to 40,000.
 - e. Despite the logistical issues, many scholars believe the numbers have been correctly translated. What is most important to remember is that, *in its original documents, God’s word is without error*. However, our translation and understanding sometimes are not. Whatever the actual number, Abraham’s descendants had surely become numerous, just as God promised (Genesis 15:5), and this fact should have given the Israelites confidence that God would also fulfill His promise to give them the land of Canaan.^{iv}
- iii. The Levites’ Special Role – 1:47-54: The Lord instructed Moses not to include the Levites in this census of fighting men (1:48-54). Just a few weeks prior, they had willingly defended the Lord after the golden calf rebellion in the camp. At that time, God said He was setting the Levites apart from the other tribes for a special purpose (Exodus 32:29). This special purpose is revealed in these early chapters of Numbers. Numbers 1:50 says they were to be in charge of the Tabernacle, carrying it during travel and caring for it during encampment. They were the ones who would disassemble it and reassemble it. They were also to encamp around the Tabernacle, guarding it so no Israelite might enter it and die.
- iv. Encampment and Marching by Tribe – Numbers 2: The Lord gave Moses instructions for arranging the tribes of Israel for encampment and also for marching (“setting out”). Of course, having a pre-determined process for these things would have made travel more efficient. Even more importantly, just as Israel’s laws were a reflection of the God they served, their orderliness also depicted that God encamped among them. The Israelites were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5), representing God to the nations around them in every way.

1. The tribes were grouped in threes, largely according to maternal heritage, with closer relatives assigned to the same group. Despite the groupings, each individual tribe encamped and marched under their own standard or banner (some kind of a flag unique to each tribe of the twelve tribes and three Levitical clans).
 2. Judah, Rueben, Ephraim, and Dan were assigned as chief tribes of the four groups. Judah was the fourth-born son of Israel but was the prophesied kingly tribe. This tribe, together with others in their threesome, was to encamp in the privileged position east of the Tabernacle, the side facing the Tabernacle's entrance. Judah was also to lead all the others whenever the Israelites marched out. Reuben's group camped to the south of the Tabernacle and marched out second. Ephraim's group camped to the west of the Tabernacle and marched out third. The grouping led by Dan camped to the Tabernacle's north and marched out last.
 3. The Levites marched in the very middle, carrying the disassembled Tabernacle, with six tribes ahead and six behind.
- v. Censuses of Levites and All Firstborn Males – Numbers 3: A second census was taken of all Levites one month or older. Levi had fathered three sons, Gershon, Kohath and Merari (Genesis 46:11), each of which became a clan of Levites.
1. *Taxation*: The primary purpose of this second census was taxation. At the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the firstborn sons of Israel were spared while the Lord put to death the firstborns of Egypt. The Lord had told the Israelites that all the firstborn males of Israel belonged to Him as a result (Exodus 13:2, 11–16; 22:29–30; 34:19–20). Most firstborn male animals were to be sacrificed (Exodus 13:13), but the firstborn sons were to be redeemed with a tax. In this case, the Lord said he would take the Levites into His service in place of the tax on the firstborn males of Israel. Therefore, Moses took a census of the Levite males one month or older, followed by a census of all the firstborn males of Israel, one month or older, at the Lord's command. The number of Israelite firstborns exceeded the number of Levites by only 273. For these, the tax was paid.
 2. *Work and Living Assignments*
 - a. Aaron was a descendant of Levi from the clan of the Kohathites but only he and his sons had the privilege of serving as Israel's priests. God set apart the other Kohathites, and all the Gershonites and Merarites, to assist Aaron and his sons in their work and take responsibility for guarding and transporting the Tabernacle.

- b. Just as the other tribes were divided into four groupings for the purpose of encampment and travel, so were the Levites. According to 2:17, the Levites' travel and encampment required them to surround the Tabernacle. Moses, Aaron and Aaron's sons (the priests), camped on the east end, near the Tabernacle entrance. The remaining Kohathites, the Gershonites, and the Merarite were positioned between the Tabernacle and the Israelites on one of the other three sides, enabling them to guard the Tabernacle area from being transgressed.
- c. Each Levite clan was given particular work assignments with regard to the Tabernacle. These are recorded in Numbers 3-4.
- vi. Third Census: Levites Numbered by Clan for Work Assignments – Numbers 4: The Lord ordered a third census for the purpose of giving work assignments to the Levites. Levite men from thirty to fifty years of age were eligible for Tabernacle work and were counted. Special Tabernacle assignments were given to each Levitical clan. The priests alone could handle the sacred items in the Tabernacle. After wrapping them with coverings, the Kohathites then carried them on their shoulders, never directly touching them.

B. Instructions for Cleansing the Camp – Numbers 5-6: The instructions in Numbers 1-4 made for a very orderly camp and travel process. Following these chapters, two chapters of law are inserted.

- i. Free from Defilement: Numbers 5 records instructions to keep the camp pure from defilement, calls on those who wronged another person to confess and make restitution, and condemned unfaithfulness, presenting the case of an unfaithful wife as an example. Adultery was to be treated as seriously as murder. It has been suggested that the laws in chapter 5 represent case studies for dealing with disorder, brought about by sin, in the camp.
- ii. The Nazirite: Consecrated to the Lord: Chapter 6, on the other hand, discusses the Nazirite vow, which represented the *ideal within the camp*. A Nazirite was a person who took a temporary vow to fast from all grape products, allow their hair to grow, and avoid all contact with dead bodies (a source of ceremonial defilement). It was a means of totally dedicating oneself to the Lord. Thus, it was a picture of consecration. This chapter deals largely with how to handle a situation in which they accidentally came into contact with a dead body. Those who took this vow were a reminder to their fellow Israelites of the priority of pursuing holiness.^v

- iii. A Holy Camp: If the camp remained pure of defilement (sin, chapter 5) and the Israelites made it their daily goal to lead holy lives (chapter 6), they would indeed represent the Lord well to the nations.
- iv. Aaronic Blessing: Chapter 6 ends with the priestly blessing. This blessing was spoken over Israelites by Aaron but was not one he himself could ensure. The blessing he spoke was the blessing *of God*. Aaron was simply His mouthpiece. The Psalms borrow heavily from the language of this blessing. It gave assurance that the Lord intended to keep His covenant promises to Abraham and to the Israelites. To have God's face shining on us is to be in His favor. Among the many uncertainties the Israelites faced once they resumed their journey, one certainty was that they would face war. God's favor and peace were certainly things they needed. Those who follow the Lord are not guaranteed freedom from trouble in the world. Jesus lived His life under God's favor yet His life was still very difficult. To have God's face turned toward us means we are recipients of His grace and peace. Will you receive God's blessings of grace and peace today, despite any difficulties you may be facing?

C. Tabernacle Offerings and the Levites – Numbers 7 and 8: These chapters describe the consecration of the Tabernacle and the Levites. Chapter 7 may be retrospectively describing the offerings given by tribe at the time the Tabernacle was set up (about a month earlier). Numbers 8 tells of the consecration of the Levites to assist the priests in their work at the Tabernacle. While Levites participated in transporting it at age 30, the age at which a Levite could assist the priests in Tabernacle work was 25. At 50, they retired from both types of service.

D. Passover Observed – Numbers 9:1-14: Chapter 9 records the celebrating of the Passover by the Israelites one year after their departure from Egypt. Verse one tells us that it occurred at the proper time, which, in fact, was one month prior to the time the censuses were ordered (compare 1:1 and 9:1). Instructions are recorded in Numbers 9 that provided a way for those who were ceremonially unclean at the time of Passover to keep the required feast by observing it one month after the normal day of celebration (9:10-11).

E. Final Preparations – Numbers 9:15-10:10

- i. The Cloud: The cloud lifting from the Tabernacle was the signal that the Israelites were to break camp and set out. Whenever the cloud settled over the Tabernacle, they were to stop and set up camp again. Sometimes they only remained encamped a few days, other times it was much longer. Day or night, they were to be prepared to set out whenever the cloud lifted. At night, the cloud appeared as fire, presumably giving light and warmth to the camp.
- ii. The Silver Trumpets: Trumpets were hammered out of silver for the purpose of announcing the setting out of camp and calling the people to an assembly.
- iii. Conclusion of Israel’s Season at Sinai: With these final words, “I am the Lord your God,” Numbers 10:10 concludes the history of Israel’s encampment at Mount Sinai. In the books of Exodus and Leviticus, we learned that Sinai was the place where Israel covenanted to be a holy nation before God, to live under His authority and represent Him to the nations. It was the place where God forged the children of Israel into a nation, teaching them His Laws of morality, issuing laws to govern their civil affairs, and prescribing proper worship. In addition, they received God’s promises: to be their God (Exodus 6:7), to bring them into the land (Exodus 6:8), to provide for them (Exodus 16:11-35; 17:6), and to dwell among them (Exodus 25:8). In Numbers 1-10, we learn that God gave them further structure, ordering the way in which they traveled and the way in which they set up their camp. In a passage covered in the next lesson, we will find Balaam the prophet looking over the camp of Israel on the plains of Moab from heights above and declaring, “How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel” (Numbers 23:9; 24:2, 5). Most importantly, the Israelites had God dwelling in the Tabernacle in their midst. The Israelites were prepared to inherit the Promised Land. God had given them all they needed to victoriously march to the land and claim it.

Summary Statement: In this context, we see that the ordering of Israel’s camp for travel, recorded in Numbers 1-10, was yet another blessing of God to prepare the people to enter the Promised Land. The Israelites had been learning to know the God of the Patriarchs since the time they left Egypt. The ordering of their camp taught them that He is a God of beauty and order and as they traveled from Sinai to Canaan, they portrayed this truth to the nations. Where God is present, there is order.

Principle: *We cannot experience the fullness of life God offers us without practicing the disciplines of peaceful and well-ordered living.*

Application: There are some of us who relish the idea of orderliness. This is usually a matter of personal temperament. However, the principle taught here is not that we should live with an obsessive need to attempt to control everything around us. If we are compulsive about trying to bring order into our lives we cannot rest in the Lord. On the other hand, we also cannot live the blessed lives God offers us and allow chaos to reign. Self-discipline is required on the part of those who are too aggressive in trying to order their lives *and* for those who prefer to “live and let live” without any semblance of order. The former need to discipline their compulsions and the latter need to discipline their “free spirits.”

[Note to translators: a “free spirit” is a person who moves through life in such a carefree manner that he or she fails to take important matters seriously.]

We must trust God to control our circumstances while simultaneously working toward living well-ordered lives. For example:

- The Christian whose life is well-ordered prioritizes his or her time to allow for Bible study and prayer and for time spent with those in our Christian community.
- Living orderly lives involves discipline in our spending so that we plan to give of our resources to God first and then plan to meet the needs of our family. We plan as well as we can for our future needs yet we do not cling to our possessions. We give as generously as possible to those in need.
- The well-ordered Christian life is one in which our homes, however meager, reflect a certain degree of organization and cleanliness. We should practice personal hygiene and attempt to keep our bodies as healthy as possible, even while we are pouring our lives out for the sake of Christ.
- We are to take good care of all that has been entrusted to us. We consider our commitments carefully and keep a written or mental log of them so we do not disappoint others by failing to keep them. We return borrowed items in a timely manner and in good condition. We do our best to keep the things we own from falling into disrepair.
- Order is brought into our homes, churches, and communities by God-ordained authorities and laws. Therefore, Christians should honor and obey these laws and authorities.

You may think some of these things are simply a matter of common sense and decency. Yet certain personalities, and sometimes also individuals who have lacked an example of structure in their upbringing, find living a well-ordered life to be quite challenging. Where failure to live a well-ordered life is a matter of rebellion of heart, we may need to speak truth into others’ lives, doing so in love. However, many Christians whose lives are chaotic are simply immature or in unusual circumstances and need our patient encouragement in this direction.

A well-ordered, godly life is a life of peace. It is not characterized by frantic, last minute attempts to fix what we have failed to plan for, but neither is it characterized by frantic attempts to control what we should be giving over to God.

Do you have a reputation for living a peaceful and well-ordered life? If not, what step will you take this week to move in that direction?

Transition: God gave the Israelites all they needed to enter the Promised Land. Once He ordered their camp for travel, it was time for them to leave Sinai.

III. Rebellion in the Camp – Numbers 10:11 – 19:22

A. Departure from Sinai – Numbers 10:11-36: Nearly one year after Israel arrived at Sinai, the cloud moved and the Israelites departed (compare Exodus 19:1 and Numbers 10:11). They marched out just as they had been instructed. After some pleading on Moses' part, his brother-in-law Hobab agreed to accompany them to the Promised Land. Moses believed the Israelites could benefit from his knowledge of the desert. A spirit of hope and enthusiasm marked their departure from Sinai. The cloud of the Lord led them along. "Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, 'Rise up, Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.' Whenever it came to rest, he said, 'Return, Lord, to the countless thousands of Israel'" (10:35-36). However, according to the very next chapter (Numbers 11), this spirit of enthusiasm did not last long. The stories about their journey from Mount Sinai to Kadesh in the Desert of Paran indicate that a growing spirit of complaints, dissatisfaction, and dissension culminated in outright rebellion against God (Numbers 14:1-10).

B. Three Complaints – Numbers 11-12

- i. First Complaint – 11:1-3: The first complaint was over the general hardships of the journey. In response, God sent fire that consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. Moses interceded for the people and the fire died down. The place was called *Taberah*, which means "burning."
- ii. Second Complaint – 11:4-35:
 1. After the general complaints, more specific ones occurred. The trouble began with cravings of the "rabble," a term which only appears this one time in the Old Testament. 11:4 seems to distinguish this group from the Israelites. It is therefore generally assumed that these were the "mixed multitude" of non-Israelites who left Egypt with Israel in the Exodus (Exodus 12:38).^{vi}
 2. A complaining spirit is contagious; unsurprisingly, the Israelites also began to complain, recalling the delights of the foods they had once enjoyed in Egypt. Their primary complaint centered on the bland diet of manna and the absence of meat. Moses poured out his

challenge before the Lord, saying he had had all he could take. He certainly had no means of providing meat for such a great number of people. The Lord answered in two ways.

- a. First, He put some of His power upon seventy elders to assist Moses in spiritual leadership. This group of leaders was apparently distinct from the group that had been appointed earlier as judges (Exodus 18:25-26).
- b. Secondly, the Lord provided more meat than the Israelites could possibly eat. Quail descended on the camp in great numbers.

However, the Lord was angry with the Israelites for their complaints and sent a plague. The place was named *Kibroth Hattaavah* meaning “graves of craving,” indicating those who died in the plague were the instigators of the trouble.

iii. Third Complaint – Numbers 12

1. A third complaint emerged, lodged against Moses by his own family. We are told that Moses married a Cushite. Scholars debate whether or not Zipporah, a Midianite, could have also been considered a Cushite. If not, she may have died and the Cushite woman would have been Moses’ new wife. It would seem that Aaron and Miriam used Moses’ marriage to a Cushite as an excuse to complain about his leadership. They resented and complained against his exclusivity as Israel’s leader.
2. In this context, a parenthetical statement tells us that Moses was more humble than anyone on the face of the earth. The word translated “humble” is alternately translated “meek.” It is a simple assertion of fact that Moses refused to defend himself in the matter. It is certainly moving to consider that “the most humble man on the face of the earth” was also “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action” (Acts 7:22)!
3. The Lord confronted Miriam and Aaron in Moses’ defense and left Miriam with a skin disorder (perhaps leprosy). The Hebrew verb tense used at the opening of this section implicates Miriam as the instigator. This is confirmed by the fact that she was the one whom the Lord judged. At Aaron’s pleading, Moses interceded for Miriam. She was healed, but not without enduring seven days of confinement outside the camp. The people all had to wait for her to return before they could move on, a truly humbling experience for Miriam!

C. Canaan Explored and Rejected – Numbers 13-14: When the Israelites arrived at Kadesh, in the Desert of Paran, they had reached Canaan’s southern border. Their grumblings were but a portent of the sad condition of their faith, one that is fully revealed in Numbers 13-14.

i. The Spies’ Discovery – Numbers 13

1. *The Spies*: The Lord told Moses to send one leader from each tribe to explore Canaan. The venture was a forty-day reconnaissance mission, in order to become familiar with the land and its people. When reading the list of those who were sent, you will probably find most of the names unfamiliar. It is noteworthy that the two exceptions are the men who have been remembered throughout the centuries because of their faith: Caleb and Moses’ aide Joshua, whose name appears in this list as Hoshea (13:8, 16).
2. *Hebron*: Hebron is highlighted among the places the spies visited. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah had all been buried there on the only piece of land Abraham had ever owned in Canaan (Genesis 23:1-20). To them, Hebron was the symbol of God’s promises. Forty years later, Caleb fought to secure this city as part of his family’s inheritance (Joshua 14:6-15; Judges 1:20).
3. *Discoveries*: What stood out among their discoveries was that the land had Anakites (men who were powerful, either in size or in influence, 13:28, 32-33), that the cities were well fortified, and that the land was very rich. A single cluster of grapes had to be carried on a pole between two of them (13:23). In other words, it was a very good land but, humanly speaking, the prospect of taking control of it was frightening.
4. *Reports and Rumors*
 - a. Two different reports were given to the Israelites by the twelve sent on the mission. The first report stated the land flowed with milk and honey (a phrase indicating that it was a rich land), but that the presence of the Anakites rendered taking over the land impossible. Caleb and Joshua gave a different report (13:30; 14:6-9), insisting that the land was good and that the Lord would do as He had promised and give it to them. The only “but” in their report was the possibility of the people rebelling against the Lord by rejecting the land He was gifting them because of their fears. “[The Canaanites’] protection is gone,” they concluded, “but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them.” The problem with the report of the other ten spies is that they left God out of the picture.

- b. The ten spies then spread an unreasonable rumor (a “bad report”) saying, “The land devours those living in it. All the people are of great size [so that] we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (13:32-33). If those who lived in Canaan were powerful (and perhaps even physically large), could the land be so bad that it could not feed those who lived there? Previously, they had stated that the land “flowed with milk and honey” (13:27)! Thus, the ten spies worked to convince their fellow Israelites that *the land that God had said was good was actually bad!*
- ii. The Israelites’ Response – 14:1-9: The Israelites were terrified by the report of the ten. They wept and grumbled stating they would have preferred to die in Egypt or even in the desert wilderness rather than fall by the sword of the Canaanites. They feared their wives and children would be taken as plunder. They decided to choose a leader to take them back to Egypt. They made their decision on the basis of fear rather than on the basis of faith in God’s promises. Hebrews 3:16-19 says their sin was one of unbelief. In Numbers 14:11, the Lord said, “They refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them.” He said they were treating Him with contempt. Despite the plea of the faithful few (Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua) not to rebel against the Lord and give in to fear (14:9), the whole assembly of Israelites rejected the Lord’s gift and even talked about stoning His faithful leaders.
- iii. Moses’ Intercession – 14:10-19
1. “Then the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites.” He said to Moses, “How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them?” (14:10-11). Indeed the Israelites had seen many mighty miracles of the Lord, but miracles alone do not ensure faith!
 2. The Lord also said to Moses, “I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they” (14:12). The Lord had made this same threat and offer after the Israelites had worshipped the golden calf: to immediately destroy the Israelites and start over building another people for Himself through Moses (Exodus 32:10). Once again, God’s threat was intended as a cue to Moses to intercede for Israel.
 3. Moses interceded for Israel, as he had done after their rebellion at Sinai (Exodus 32-33), by appealing to God’s glory and His character. Here we have an important lesson about effective prayer.

- a. First, Moses appealed to the Lord on the basis of His glory. In summary, he said, “The other nations have heard You are with Israel. They have heard You go before them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. What will the other nations say about You if You do not bring the Israelites into the land You promised them on oath?” Moses reminded the Lord of His promise and appealed to His glory among the nations.
 - b. Then Moses appealed to the Lord’s character, quoting God’s self-description back to Him: “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished; He punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” (Numbers 14:18; Exodus 34:6-7). On this basis Moses made his request: “In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now” (14:19).
 - c. Moses has given us a wise model for intercession. Do we appeal to God on the basis of His character and His glory when we ask to have our needs met, when we ask for guidance, when we pray for the salvation of someone, when we ask for healing? When our prayers are not immediately answered in the way we want, are we willing to believe that God is actually bringing Himself more glory by delaying to respond or even, in some cases, by saying no?
- iv. Judgment and Hope – 14:20-38: In response to Moses’ prayer, the Lord forgave Israel. He did not treat them as they deserved and put them immediately to death. However, there were consequences for their sin.
1. *Forty Years of Wandering*: Not one of the adult Israelites (those twenty years and older) who saw the plagues on Egypt, who witnessed and experienced the Lord’s mighty and miraculous deliverance, who were old enough to be accountable for failing to act upon what they experienced, would live to enter Canaan. In fact, what would happen to them would be just as they said they would have preferred: they would die in the wilderness. They would wander one year for each of the forty days that Canaan had been explored until that entire generation of Israelites died. (The forty years of wandering included the nearly two years that took place between the time they left Egypt and the time they explored Canaan.) God showed His mercy by sparing them, by providing for them all the years they wandered, and by giving them what they preferred (death in the wilderness). However, His mercy was also

His judgment. They would never receive the rich blessing of the Promised Land. They would die in a desolate place. God’s mercy and His justice, His love and His judgment, are always equally maintained. Human beings, including Christians, are prone to err on the side of love and mercy or on the side of justice and judgment. Only God perfectly maintains both.

2. *Immediate Deaths of the Ten Spies*: The ten men who had spread the bad report were struck down by a plague (apparently, that happened immediately). Meanwhile, Caleb and Joshua’s faith was honored. God not only spared them from the plague the other spies suffered but also promised they would be the only adults to live to enter Canaan.
 3. *Hope for the Next Generation*: The adult Israelites would not enter Canaan, but that did not mean that God would not keep His promises. Thankfully, although our personal failures may mean we will suffer loss, God’s ultimate purposes are never thwarted by our failures. *The children of the Israelites who refused to enter the land would enter the land in their parents’ place (14:31)*. God’s promise that their children would inherit Canaan was the only hope offered to the generation who spent the remainder of their lives in the wilderness.
- v. The Israelites’ Presumption – 14:39-45: Once the people witnessed the death of the ten leaders who had spread the bad report and considered the misery of turning back, they decided to enter Canaan after all. But the Lord had ordered Moses to have the people turn back from Kadesh toward the desert. Moses warned them that the Lord would not be with them in their efforts, but they presumptively entered the hill country of Canaan anyway. The result was their defeat: the Amalekites and Canaanites attacked them and drove them out of the land.

D. Future Hope Secured: Offerings – Numbers 15: As an encouragement that God would keep His promise to the next generation of Israelites, the Lord gave them supplementary instructions about adding grain and drink offerings to their animal sacrifices “*after [they] entered the land [He] was giving [them] as a home*” (15:2). Sacrifices could be offered for sins committed unintentionally, but as verses 30-31 state, “Anyone who sins defiantly... must be cut off from the people of Israel... their guilt remains on them.” The ten spies and the man stoned for abusing the Sabbath (15:32-36) were examples of such individuals. The chapter ends with an instruction to have the Israelites wear tassels on the corners of the garments *as a necessary reminder to obey the Lord* (15:37-41).

E. **Rebellion and Aaron’s Priesthood** – Numbers 16-18: Numbers 16-18

present yet another cycle of rebellion and the Lord’s response to it. We are not told exactly when during the forty years of Israel’s wandering that certain men challenged Moses’ and Aaron’s leadership. Korah, a Levite, and two Reubenites, Dathan and Abiram led 250 community leaders in a rebellion.

- i. Deaths of Rebels: Moses and Aaron asked the Lord not to kill the *all* the Israelites on account of the sin of these leaders (16:22). Therefore, the Lord put to death those involved in the rebellion, and did so in a rather dramatic way. According to 16:28-33, He defended Moses’ authority in Israel by fulfilling his prophecy that Korah, Dathan, and Abiram would not die a natural death. The earth opened and swallowed up the three ringleaders (16:31-33). The Lord defended Aaron’s authority by sending fire out of the sanctuary that consumed the 250 rebellious leaders (16:35) who were acting as priests by holding censers with incense. They died because they were unauthorized to hold the priestly position. The Israelites blamed Aaron and Moses for the deaths of the 250 community leaders. In anger, the Lord sent a plague among them, from which 14,700 died. The plague ended only because Moses instructed Aaron to act in intercession. The Lord takes grumbling against His appointed leaders very personally (compare 17:5 and 10). By challenging God’s appointed leaders, the Israelites had ultimately challenged God Himself.
- ii. Aaron’s Budding Staff: This ongoing rebellion against God’s appointed leaders, and the Aaronic priesthood in particular, had to be permanently resolved. The Lord caused Aaron’s staff to be the only staff among those of the twelve tribal leaders of Israel to bud, blossom, and produce almonds (chapter 17). From that time forward, Aaron’s staff was to be kept with the Ark of the Covenant as a reminder that he and his descendants were God’s appointed priests (17:10).
- iii. Privileges and Responsibilities of God’s Appointed Leaders: Following the rebellion, Numbers 18 reaffirms the descendants of Aaron and the Levites as God’s appointed priests and clergy by restating their unique responsibilities and privileges. According to verse 20, they would not receive land in Canaan as the other tribes would. Rather the Lord would sustain them through the portions of the Israelites’ tithes and offerings.

F. **Cleansing from Contact with Death** – Numbers 19: An entire generation of Israelites died in the desert. Contact with the dead made one “unclean” (Leviticus 17:15; 21:11; Numbers 5:2). The “red cow” ritual described in Numbers 19 provided a cheaper, easier way than animal sacrifice for the younger generation to be cleansed after burying their dead parents.^{vii}

Summary Statement: God gave the Israelites everything they needed to enter the Promised Land. Yet they had the choice to enter the land or to reject it. They chose to make their decision on the basis of fear rather than faith.

At the beginning of this discussion, I said that we would discover from the Bible reasons why too few professing Christians discover the abundant life of spiritual wealth that the Lord promises us. According to the New Testament, the Israelites' failure serves as a warning of two serious possibilities.

- The first possibility is that an individual may come to understand the Gospel, the good news of redemption, and seem to embrace it without really being saved, because no true change of heart occurs. These may be people who like the idea of going to heaven but secretly do not want anything to do with repenting and allowing Jesus to change their lives. They may even be faithful church attenders. The book of Hebrews gives serious warnings to such individuals who *think they are saved but really are not*. It tells us to “be careful” (Hebrews 4:1) that we do not make the mistake of thinking we have entered the place of rest when we never actually have. One reason then that some professing Christians never experience fullness of life is that they have never really been converted.
- The second possibility that we are warned about in the New Testament is the possibility that we may be genuinely saved but continue to live in a defeated way, as though we have received no power to be transformed. These are people who remain immature in their spiritual lives, even after they have been Christians for a long time. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 warns us to “be careful” (10:12) that we do not fall into this kind of sin, a failure to grow spiritually and inherit all God offers us in Christ (see also 1 Corinthians 3:1-3). The second reason professing Christians never experience abundant life in Christ then, is spiritual immaturity. All new converts are immature, but if we do not feed ourselves with the spiritual meat of God's word and exercise faith in applying it, we will live our lives under the hand of our Father's discipline instead of claiming all He planned to give us.

2 Peter 1:3 says that God has given His children *everything we need* for godly living, all we need in order to possess the spiritually rich and fruitful life He offers us. All we have to do to possess the “Promised Land” is simply to trust and obey Him, to yield to Him.

Application: We can make more specific application to our lives by considering what we learned in Numbers about how Israel went wrong.

- First, the Israelites insisted on living in the past. They continually tried to glorify their experience in Egypt, although in reality, they had been slaves there. When God's people live in the past, they experience a degenerating Christian life rather than a spiritually fruitful one.

- The Israelites not only longed for the past, they lived their present lives under the shadow of fear. Their second failure was a failure to live by faith. Acting in faith really comes down to believing God. All twelve spies saw the same things in Canaan. The majority chose to believe in the forces of the things they could see with their physical eyes (the “giants” in the land), but Joshua and Caleb chose to view the land with spiritual eyes. God was far more powerful than the Canaanites and Anakites. He said the land was good and promised to give it to them. They chose to fully believe Him. It is only ever a minority of people who do (Matthew 7:14). If we want to be counted among them and inherit all God has for us, we must *exercise faith in our daily experience*. Exercising faith will also keep us from any temptation to live in the past.

Principle: *We cannot inherit the Promised Land of fullness in Christ without regularly exercising faith.*

Sometimes we hear people say, “If only God would prove Himself to me, if only I could see a real miracle, I would believe.” The Israelites saw plenty of miracles, yet we learn from their example that miracles do not always create faith. They may create fear, shock, awe, and even a kind of respect. But they do not necessarily give us the kind of trust in God that we need. Faith is not developed by seeing miracles but by being exercised! Exercising faith is the means of strengthening faith (Hebrews 3:7-4:11).

All Christians experience fear. Fear in itself is not sin but temptation. However, once we allow fear to prevail and refuse to step out in faith, we have sinned and rebelled against God. *If we allow fear to dominate us, we will never experience all that God offers us.* Fear is a strategy that Satan has successfully used to keep Christians from becoming all that God wants them to be, from doing all God wants them to do, and experiencing all God wants to give us.

Conclusion

The Christian life is a pilgrimage with tremendous spiritual blessings to be inherited along the journey and at our journey’s end. Perhaps we have never considered that unwillingness to possess all God offers us is actually rebellion against Him. It is indeed, because it is our refusal to obey Him and to believe Him. How might we encourage one another to be disciplined, to move on to maturity, and to exercise faith in our daily lives, since we are on this pilgrimage together? Once we have been redeemed, all the spiritual riches of Christ are ours for the taking.

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