

CHAPTER 6: Numbers

When we left off last time God was speaking to Moses in the tent of meeting and He directs Moses to do something... **“Take a census of the entire Israelite community by their clans and families, counting the name of every individual male. You and Aaron are to number all in Israel who can serve in the army, those who are twenty years old or older, by their divisions.”** (Numbers 1:2-3) This is where the book of Numbers gets its name, from the “numbering” of Israel. That number, the final count of Israelite males, not including the Levites, turns out to be just over 600,000 men. This means the entire population including women and children would have been somewhere between 1 and 2 million people. So Israel is a very large nation.

Instructions are laid out as to how the various tribes of Israel are to be arranged in the camp. The Tabernacle is in the center. This represents God’s holy presence being at the center of Israel’s life. Around the Tabernacle are the priests and the Levites. The remaining 12 tribes are arranged around them with Judah at the head.

On the day that the tabernacle was set up the cloud covered the tabernacle... and from evening until morning there was a fiery appearance over the tabernacle. This is the way it used to be continually: The cloud would cover it by day, and there was a fiery appearance by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, then after that the Israelites would begin their journey; and in whatever place the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. (Numbers 9:15-17) God is leading the way!

After a year at Mount Sinai, the cloud of God’s presence lifts from the Tabernacle. It guides the large Israelite population away from Mount Sinai and back out into the wilderness. **So the Israelites set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai; and the cloud settled in the wilderness of Paran.** (Numbers 10:12) This is the next leg of their journey to the Promised Land.

The people of Israel find themselves once again back in the wilderness being guided by God. If you will recall, on their journey between Egypt and Mount Sinai the people grumbled and complained the whole way. And God always provided them with food and water. Well, do you think that the people of Israel have changed at all during their year at Mount Sinai? Do you? You would like to think that they had.

Now the mixed multitude who were among them craved more desirable foods, and so the Israelites wept again and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We

remember the fish we used to eat freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we are dried up, and there is nothing at all before us except this manna!" (Numbers 11:4-6) As you can see God has been providing the people with manna, bread from heaven, every day. He is still feeding them and yet they complain. What else would you expect from this people? It's the same old song, different verse. Some things just don't change. As before, God provides quail for the people. But this time, because of their ungrateful attitude, God strikes the people with a great plague and many of them die.

Even Moses's own brother Aaron and his sister Miriam get into the act. They criticize Moses in front of the people. They question whether God speaks only through Moses. God Himself comes to Moses's defense. He summons Aaron and Miriam to the doorway of the Tabernacle.

The Lord said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak with him in a dream. My servant Moses is not like this; he is faithful in all My house. With him I will speak face to face... Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" The anger of the Lord burned against them, and He departed. (Numbers 12:6-9)

Miriam is struck with leprosy and becomes white as snow. When Aaron sees what has happened to her, he is immediately repentant. Moses intercedes for Miriam. Her leprous condition lasts for only seven days during which time she is isolated outside the camp because she is unclean. It is clear from this incident that Moses IS God's man. Moses IS the one thru whom God will speak to the people.

The Israelites make their way from Mount Sinai thru the wilderness of Paran. They are now camped at Kadesh-barnea, about 60 miles from the Promised Land. They are getting really close. God tells Moses to send out 12 spies, one from each tribe, to go and investigate the land. For the next 40 days the spies scope out the fruitful land. They take note of the people who are occupying it. Afterward they return to the Israelite camp and report their observations.

They told Moses, "We went to the land where you sent us. It is indeed flowing with milk and honey and this is its fruit." (Numbers 13:27) They show Moses and the people samples of the amazing fruit they found there – large clusters of grapes, pomegranates and figs, just to name a few. **"But the inhabitants are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. Moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there."** (Numbers 13:28) In other words, "There are giants in the land! And there are a whole bunch of really mean and fierce warriors we have to contend with –

Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites and Canaanites. They are all over the place!” The majority report sounds less than optimistic.

Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, well let’s just say they see the situation quite differently. **Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses, saying, “Let us go up and occupy it, for we are well able to conquer it.”** (Numbers 13:30) Why is Caleb so confident? Because he knows God had promised to give Israel this land.

But the other ten spies express their concern about attacking the inhabitants of the land. **“We are not able to go up against these people, because they are stronger than we are!”** (Numbers 13:31) Notice that their focus is on THEMSELVES and not on God. **“The land that we passed through to investigate is a land that devours its inhabitants. All the people we saw there are of great stature... we seemed like grasshoppers both to ourselves and to them.”** (Numbers 13:32-33) Their tone is negative and their attitude one of discouragement.

At this point the people hearing this turn and rebel against Moses. **Then all the community raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, “If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had perished in this wilderness!”** (Numbers 14:1-2) They actually consider getting a new leader and heading back to Egypt!

Joshua and Caleb cannot believe what they are hearing! They said to the whole community of the Israelites, **“The land we passed through to investigate is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us – a land that is flowing with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord, and do not fear the people of the land... the Lord is with us. Do not fear them!”** (Numbers 14:7-9) Joshua and Caleb express their confidence, not in themselves in or Israel’s army, but in God. HE will give them the land!

The ten negative and faithless spies stir the people up into a fearful rage. They threaten to kill Joshua and Caleb. In an unbelievable turn of events the Israelite people make it clear to Moses that they have NO INTENTION of going up and taking possession of the land. What? Are you serious? After everything they have been through? After all of those mighty works of God that they have personally witnessed?

At this point God is fed up with His people. Just like before at Mount Sinai after the golden calf incident, God threatens to annihilate them and start over with Moses. Once again Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. Moses makes the same arguments he did before and reminds God of His covenant promise to Abraham. And so, while God WILL KEEP His promise to Abraham, He gives THIS group of Israelites exactly what they asked for – “So you won’t go up and take possession of the land, well fine!”

God tells Moses... **“They will by no means see the land that I swore to their fathers, nor will any of them who despised Me see it. Say to them, ‘As I live, says the Lord, I will surely do to you just what you have spoken in My hearing. Your dead bodies will fall in this wilderness – all those... from 20 years old and upward who have murmured against Me. You will by no means enter into the land where I swore to settle you. The only exceptions are Caleb and Joshua... But I will bring your little ones... and they will enjoy the land that you despised.”** (Numbers 14:23, 28-31)

So it is back out into the wilderness for this faithless bunch! God sentences them to wander around the desolate desert until they have all died out. Their children will eventually get to enter the Promised Land, but not them! As for Joshua and Caleb, the faithful “top line” God-fearing spies from this generation, they will survive to take possession of the land. Those ten “bottom line” spies who gave the discouraging report that stirred the people up, God sent a plague and killed them all.

A handful of remorseful Israelites approaches Moses with the idea of going up and taking a portion of the land. But Moses warns them not to do it. **“Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, and you will be defeated before your enemies. For the Amalekites and the Canaanites are there before you, and you will fall by the sword. Because you have turned away from the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.”** (Numbers 14:42-43) They don’t listen to Moses, head out anyway, and are killed by their enemies. God’s judgment on this generation is harsh and it is final. Their lack of faith in God has cost them. They must now live with the results. You might think that this incident would be a wake-up call for the people, but no. They get even worse!

Back out in the wilderness the sons of Korah, a group of Levites, challenges the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Some people just never learn! God deals severely with them. He opens up a chasm in the earth that swallows many of the rebellious people and their families. Then God sends down fire from heaven that consumes the remaining rebels. God reinforces His choice of Moses as the undisputed leader of His people.

We now fast-forward several decades. It has been 37 years since Moses sent out the 12 spies to scope out the Promised Land. Almost all of the faithless Exodus generation has died. Hundreds of thousands of bodies have fallen in the desert. Now a new generation of Israelites (the children of the Exodus generation) is ready to enter the Promised Land. Is this new generation any different than the old one?

The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness of Zin and find themselves without water. That sounds familiar. The thirsty people gather around Moses and Aaron. **The people contended with Moses, saying, “If only we had died when our brothers died before the Lord! Why have you brought up the Lord’s community into this**

wilderness? So that we and our cattle should die here? Why have you brought us up from Egypt only to bring us to this dreadful place?” (Numbers 20:3-5) This new generation of Israelites seems to have forgotten the lessons from the past. In fact, they sound a whole lot like their parents, don't they?

God commands Moses to take his staff and speak to a certain rock. God tells Moses to speak to the rock and it will produce water. But Moses doesn't do that. Instead he speaks angrily to the people: **“Listen, you rebels, must we bring water out of this rock for you?”** (Numbers 20:10) You sense Moses's frustration.

Then Moses raised his hand, and struck the rock twice with his staff. And water came out abundantly. So the community drank, and their beasts drank too. (Numbers 20:11) The good news is the people got water. The bad news is that Moses has just disobeyed God's instruction. His anger at the people got the best of him. What did Moses do wrong? Instead of speaking to the rock, he hit it – twice! As a result of not following God's instruction, Moses brings upon himself the same fate as the faithless Exodus generation. He too will die without getting to enter into the Promised Land.

It is not very long after this that the people resume their grumbling and griping against Moses and God. Here we go again! As before, God brings judgment on the people. He sends poisonous snakes that bite the people. Many of them die. Moses intercedes on behalf of the people yet again. God tells Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Whoever looks upon the snake will be healed of their snake bites and live. And so it is that the people who obey God are healed. God provides healing, but on HIS terms. God uses this symbol of the snake on a pole, that which produces death, to represent the very source of life.

The Israelites head next into the plains of Moab. Here we are introduced to a pagan diviner, a satanic sorcerer named Balaam. One might describe Balaam as “a prophet-for-profit!” The king of Moab is concerned about this huge group of people who are migrating thru his territory. So, being superstitious, he hires Balaam to pronounce curses on them. But God intervenes and won't allow Balaam to curse His people. No matter how much money the king of Moab throws Balaam's way, he just cannot curse Israel! God won't let him. God tells Balaam that they are a blessed people. God instructs Balaam not to meet with the king any more.

However, when the king of Moab summons Balaam and promises him great wealth, Balaam can't resist. He sets out on his donkey to go meet the king. On the way Balaam's donkey sees an angel of the Lord with his sword drawn blocking the path. The donkey turns aside to avoid the angel. Balaam cannot see the angel and so he gets angry at his donkey and hits it three times. **Then the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey and she said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have beaten**

me these three times?” And Balaam said to the donkey, “You have made me look stupid; I wish there were a sword in my hand, for I would kill you right now.” The donkey said to Balaam, “Am not I your donkey that you have ridden ever since I was yours until this day? Have I ever attempted to treat you this way?” And he said, “No.” Then the Lord opened Balaam’s eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the way with his sword drawn in his hand; so he bowed his head and threw himself down with his face to the ground. (Numbers 22:28-31)

The angel of the Lord informs Balaam that if his donkey had not turned aside, Balaam would have been killed. “Your donkey just saved your life, Balaam!” The angel warns Balaam that he must ONLY speak the words the Lord tells him to say. And so Balaam keeps blessing the Israelites. This, of course, angers the king of Moab.

“The oracle of Balaam... A star will march forth out of Jacob, and a scepter will rise out of Israel... A ruler will be established from Jacob...” (Numbers 24:15-19) Not only does Balaam bless Israel instead of cursing them, but God gives Balaam a vision about a future Israelite ruler who will one day bring God’s justice to all the nations. This vision reinforces Jacob’s promise to Judah (when Jacob was on his deathbed) back in Genesis – **“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until He comes to whom it belongs; the nations will obey Him.”** (Genesis 49:10) Here God speaks a prophecy concerning a future Israelite king and He does it thru an evil, pagan sorcerer named Balaam!

These stories about Balaam appear right in the middle of all the wilderness rebellion stories. You have those complaining Israelites down in the plains of Moab consistently exhibiting “bottom line” behavior. But God keeps on blessing them anyway. He provides them with food and water which they can see. But at the same time, completely unbeknownst to them, God is intervening on their behalf. Up in the Moabite hills where Balaam and the king of Moab are scheming against Israel, God puts His hand of protection and blessing on His people. God is faithful to His covenant promises even though His faithless people are completely clueless to what He is doing for them way up in the hills of Moab.

Balaam refuses to give up. Since he cannot pronounce a curse on Israel, he comes up with a whole new strategy. He tells the king of Moab to corrupt Israel morally. That way God will curse them Himself. The king follows Balaam’s advice. He sends young Moabite and Midianite women into the camp of Israel. They seduce many of the Israelite men and lead them into idolatry. This violates God’s clear commandments and He becomes very angry with them. In an act of judgment, God sends a deadly plague which kills 24,000 Israelites.

God also judges Balaam for his part in Israel's sin. Toward the end of the book of Numbers God has Balaam killed in a battle ironically against the Israelites upon whom he had pronounced many blessings.

God directs Moses to take another census of the new generation of Israelites. As it turns out in the past 40 years there has been only a slight decrease in their overall numbers. Despite the deaths of hundreds of thousands during their years of wilderness wanderings, God has replenished their population.

The Promised Land is divided up. It is apportioned out to the various tribes. There are several things worth noting here. (1) No land is given to the tribe of Levi. They are a tribe of priests. Instead they will receive individual cities located within the boundaries of each tribe. (2) The tribe of Dan is located on the Mediterranean Sea in Philistine country. This will become important later. (3) The tribes of Gad and Reuben are located on the east side of the Jordan River. This is technically outside the boundaries of the Promised Land. (4) There are two tribes of Manasseh. These are referred to as "half tribes." Ephraim and Manasseh were the sons of Joseph, so technically the two half tribes of Manasseh and the tribe of Ephraim make up the tribes of Joseph which are given a large portion of the land.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go up this mountain... see the land I have given to the Israelites. When you have seen it you will be gathered to your ancestors..." (Numbers 27:12-13) So Moses who is 120 years old at this time knows that he doesn't have much longer to live.

The Lord replied to Moses, "Take Joshua son of Nun... and lay your hand on him, set him before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him publicly." So Moses did as the Lord commanded him... (Numbers 27:18,22) Joshua, Moses's army general, is commissioned to be Moses's successor whenever Moses dies. This will provide for a smooth transition of leadership.

The tribes of Gad and Reuben request that they be allowed to settle in the high plains region east of the Jordan River (mentioned earlier). Moses allows this, but only on one condition – their armies must cross the Jordan River with the rest of their brothers and help them to conquer their lands. They agree to do this.

A new generation stands poised to enter the Promised Land. But how successful will they be? The thing that prevented their parents and grandparents from conquering the Promised Land 40 years before was a lack of faith in God. They forgot what God had promised them. Moses realizes that this new generation is not a whole lot different from their parents. So he takes the time to remind them of everything God has said up to this point. Moses gives a refresher course of sorts to prepare the people spiritually for the task that lies ahead. That is what the next book, Deuteronomy is all about.