

BOOK OF DISCONTENT, UNBELIEF AND FAILURE MOBILIZING GOD'S TROOPS FOR CONQUEST

COMMENTARY ON BOOK OF NUMBERS

PERSISTENT COMPLAINING, UNBELIEF AND RESISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP DELAY THE MOBILIZATION OF GOD'S TROOPS FOR CONQUEST AND POSSESSION OF THE PROMISED LAND

Paul Apple (February 2021)

For each section:

- Thesis statement ... to focus on the big idea
- Analytical outline ... to guide the understanding
- Devotional questions ... to encourage life application
- Representative quotations ... to stimulate deeper insight

Numbers 14:11: *“The Lord said to Moses, ‘How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?’”*

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BACKGROUND NOTES

Raymond Brown: Numbers might not score a high rating in a ‘favourite book of the Bible’ competition. Its unexciting lists, tribal statistics, community archives, legal stipulations, ceremonial formalities, priestly duties and ancient laws are strangely interspersed with discouraging stories about leadership crises, family jealousy, widespread discontent, recurrent unbelief and rebellion and even apostasy. . . How does the story of an unnecessarily delayed Israelite migration impinge on our lives as Christians at the beginning of a new millennium?

One of the distinctive characteristics of Numbers is the astonishing variety of literature used in its compilation. It includes a diverse collection of prose and poetry, tribal lists, camping instructions, priestly regulations, worship calendars, detailed travelogues, military records, stories, speeches and songs. Recent study has emphasized that, far from being an Old Testament ‘junk room’, there are clear links between seemingly disparate genres in the unfolding material. Mary Douglas believes that this ‘literary masterpiece’ has ‘been very carefully constructed’ and that an ‘unexpectedly complex and elegant rhetorical structure’ can be discerned in the final literary presentation of the story. . .

This ‘piece of extraordinarily skilful writing’ describes a people with certainties. For all their mistakes, they know they are loved, and that true freedom is to be found only in obedience to the God who made them. Even when they fail he will restore them, and though there are hardships en route, he is leading them on to an indescribably better future. Life is an accompanied pilgrimage, not a meaningless maze. Jesus said that he alone was ‘*the way*’, imagery gratefully adopted by the earliest believers to declare their identity and affirm their destiny.

Timothy Ashley: The story is rather simple. Israel is counted by Moses, Aaron, and the leaders in order to prepare for the march to Canaan and life in the land following the conquest (**chs. 1–4**). After further exhortations to holy living and preparations to depart from Mt. Sinai (**5:1–10:10**), Israel leaves the holy mountain for Canaan (**10:11–12:13**). Spies are sent out from the oasis of Kadesh-barnea to reconnoiter. When they return to Moses and the people, their report is split. The majority say that the land and its inhabitants are too mighty to be taken. The minority (Caleb and Joshua) say that, since God had promised victory, he would bring victory for Israel, despite the strength of the land and its people. The people of Israel choose to believe the majority and are ready to go back to Egypt (thus rebelling against the leadership of Yahweh as well as that of Moses and Aaron) when God intervenes and punishes their disbelief and disobedience. Because of their sin, every person over the age of twenty would wander and die in the wilderness without coming into possession of Canaan. They would wander forty years, until the whole generation was dead (**chs. 13–14**).

The Israelites decide to try to make things better on their own. Unassisted by God (or Moses), they try to conquer the land but are humiliated in defeat (**14:40–45**). So for nearly forty years the people wander around Kadesh-barnea in the wilderness until all that generation dies (**chs. 16–19**). They then return to Kadesh-barnea, and are told to set out once again for Canaan. They depart from Kadesh-barnea and travel to the plains of Moab, just outside the land of promise (**chs. 20–21**). Along the way, they win some battles, showing that the tide is turning (**21:1–4, 21–35**). Just outside Canaan, the people are blessed by Balaam, a foreign seer (**chs. 22–24**). After his

blessing, they sin further at Peor and are punished again (**ch. 25**). On the plains of Moab a new census is taken to mark the new beginning (**ch. 26**). The people wait for further instructions for life in the land of Canaan, where Joshua will lead them after the death of Moses (**chs. 27–36**).

MacArthur:

Title:

The English title “*Numbers*” comes from the Greek (LXX) and Latin (Vg.) versions. This designation is based on the numberings that are a major focus of chaps. **1–4** and **26**. The most common Hebrew title comes from the fifth word in the Hebrew text of **1:1**, “*in the wilderness [of]*.” This name is much more descriptive of the total contents of the book, which recount the history of Israel during almost 39 years of wandering in the wilderness. Another Hebrew title, favored by some early church Fathers, is based on the first word of the Hebrew text of **1:1**, “*and He spoke*.” This designation emphasizes that the book records the Word of God to Israel.

Author and Date:

Numbers was written in the final year of Moses’ life. The events from 20:1 to the end occur in the 40th year after the Exodus. The account ends with Israel poised on the eastern side of the Jordan River across from Jericho (**36:13**), which is where the conquest of the land of Canaan began (**Josh. 3–6**). The book of Numbers must be dated ca. 1405 B.C., since it is foundational to the book of Deuteronomy, and Deuteronomy is dated in the 11th month of the 40th year after the Exodus (**Deut. 1:3**).

Themes:

Numbers chronicles the experiences of two generations of the nation of Israel. The first generation participated in the Exodus from Egypt. Their story begins in **Ex. 2:23** and continues through Leviticus and into the first 14 chapters of Numbers. This generation was numbered for the war of conquest in Canaan (**1:1–46**). However, when the people arrived at the southern edge of Canaan, they refused to enter the Land (**14:1–10**). Because of their rebellion against the Lord, all the adults 20 and over (except Caleb and Joshua) were sentenced to die in the wilderness (**14:26–38**). In **chaps. 15–25**, the first and second generations overlap; the first died out as the second grew to adulthood. A second numbering of the people commenced the history of this second generation (**26:1–56**). These Israelites did go to war (**26:2**) and inherited the land (**26:52–56**). The story of this second generation, beginning in **Numbers 26:1**, continues through the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

Three theological themes permeate Numbers. First, the Lord Himself communicated to Israel through Moses (**1:1; 7:89; 12:6–8**), so the words of Moses had divine authority. Israel’s response to Moses mirrored her obedience or disobedience to the Lord. Numbers contains three distinct divisions based on Israel’s response to the word of the Lord: obedience (**chaps. 1–10**), disobedience (**chaps. 11–25**), and renewed obedience (**chaps. 26–36**). The second theme is that the Lord is the God of judgment. Throughout Numbers, the “anger” of the Lord was aroused in response to Israel’s sin (**11:1, 10, 33; 12:9; 14:18; 25:3, 4; 32:10, 13, 14**). Third, the faithfulness of the Lord to keep His promise to give the seed of Abraham the land of Canaan is emphasized (**15:2; 26:52–56; 27:12; 33:50–56; 34:1–29**).

Chuck Swindoll: In this book, the people of Israel tested God’s patience, and He in turn tested

their endurance and faithfulness. Though the people failed many times, God showed His own faithfulness by His constant presence leading the way: through a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

More than just a history lesson, the book of Numbers reveals how God reminded Israel that He does not tolerate rebellion, complaining, and disbelief without invoking consequences. He taught His people how to walk with Him—not just with their feet through the wilderness but with their mouths in worship, hands in service, and lives as witnesses to the surrounding nations. He was their God, they were His people, and He expected them to act like it.

Dale Brueggemann: For the community of Israel facing the promise and demands of the conquest, this message about their predecessors would have prompted them to stay with God's well-ordered plan, to follow his chosen leaders, and to count on his protection and blessing. The wilderness complaints and wanderings, followed by the death of a whole generation of would-be conquerors, should have been a potent warning against repeating that generation's folly. That generation became the Old Testament byword for failing to enter rest because of unbelief (**Ps 95:8–11**). And that generation's story still names us as its audience for both its warnings and encouragement (**Heb 3:8–11; 4:3–7**).

Michael LeFebvre: The generation of the Exodus saw the plagues of God against Egypt. They directly experienced his wonders that broke pharaoh's oppression and by which they were redeemed from bondage. Notwithstanding this amazing, firsthand experience of God, the adjectives repeatedly attached to that generation throughout the Bible include "unbelieving," "stubborn," and "stiff-necked." The story of that generation's remarkable faithlessness is especially highlighted in the first half of the book of Numbers. . .

the book of Numbers teaches the emerging generation to learn from the faithlessness of the previous generation, but to do so with understanding and without a judgmental attitude. . .

The book of Numbers is a testimony to the steadfast love of God for his people in both discipline and blessing. It offers spiritual help for every generation of his church to grow in faithfulness to him. But in a day like today, when the church is marked by confusion, division, and widespread spiritual apathy, Numbers has a special message of inspiration for Christian young people of the emerging generation. It is a timely study for those who would learn faithfulness and foster renewal among the people of God.

Kelly Needham: Once you get through **chapters 1-10**, which set the scene for life in the wilderness, it is action-packed. There is a superabundance of quail, conflict between leaders, a severe case of leprosy, the spying out of the land, plagues, battles, the ground opening up to swallow up whole families, and that's only in **chapters 11-16**. There is so much happening in this book! It is truly a page-turner, leading readers through feelings of shock, sorrow, anger, despair, and curiosity with every chapter. . .

God is speaking through every verse in the Bible because he is the ultimate author behind it. But there are times in the Bible when God's thoughts, feelings, and opinions are conveyed directly. And Numbers is a book that is full of that. As the action progresses it is often punctuated with

God's thoughts about the situation, and there is so much we can learn about his character through these moments.

Iain Duguid: The book of Numbers, however, starts out in the wilderness and ends up in the wilderness. In fact, the Hebrew name for this biblical book, fittingly enough, is precisely that: "*In the Wilderness.*" Israel started out the book of Numbers on the brink of the Promised Land, being counted for the holy war that would be required to enter, and they ended it still on the brink of the Promised Land, ready to have another chance to enter into the enjoyment of what God had promised. In between the beginning and the end are thirty-six chapters of wandering, chapters that cover some forty years and record the lives of a whole generation. Yet at the end of the book, even though geographically the Israelites had progressed in three stages from the sojourn at the wilderness of Sinai (**Num. 1:1–10:10**), by way of the journey to Kadesh-barnea (10:11–20:1), and then on to the plains of Moab (**20:1–36:13**), they had in some ways simply come full circle, back to where they started. They are still in the wilderness, waiting to enter the Promised Land. The essentially circular narrative structure, lacking in progress, is not an error or failure on the author's part but is a mark of his literary skill, a part of his message.

In fact, though, the end is not quite a complete return to the beginning. The book of Numbers is essentially the story of two generations. Each generation undergoes a census in the book: the first generation at the beginning of the book, and the second generation in **Numbers 26**. **Numbers 1–25** is the story of the first generation—a story of unbelief, rebellion, despair, and death. It shows us what happens to the generation that refuses to place their trust in the Lord in spite of his manifest trustworthiness: they are unable to enter his rest, and their bodies are scattered over the wilderness. **Numbers 27–36**, though, starts the story of the next generation, a story that begins and ends with Zelophehad's daughters, whose appeal for an inheritance is the first issue to be addressed in the beginning of that story in **Numbers 27** and the last to be covered as the book concludes in **Numbers 36**. These women of faith are emblematic of the new generation because they were deeply concerned about ensuring that their descendants would have an inheritance in the Promised Land—even though not one inch of it had yet been won by Israel at the time when they first raised the issue in **Numbers 27**. Zelophehad's daughters believed firmly in the promises of God, and so they acted in faith on those promises, claiming a share in the future inheritance of God's people for themselves and for their children too. So, in broad terms we may say that the story of the book of Numbers is the story of two consecutive generations, a generation of unbelief that leads to death and a generation of faith that will lead to life. . .

So what is life all about? Sometimes we are tempted to believe that the wilderness we see is really all there is: that when all is said and done, there is no guiding purpose or meaning to this world. Our lives appear as meaningless as the game of cricket is to the uninitiated: days full of incomprehensible activity that at the end of them accomplish exactly nothing. Yet the deeper structure of the book of Numbers points us in a different direction. On the surface our lives may seem to wander from one place to the next, driven apparently off-course by our grumbling and sin and the vicissitudes of fate. Yet under and through and behind it all, there is a guiding hand, a divine author, who holds the whole grand narrative in his hand and brings it around to the ending he himself has written for us. There is a story line to our personal stories, an intricate plot that will, after all of life's twists and turns, end up with him bringing us into the place he has

prepared for us. That is the reality to which we need to firmly hold. . .

To keep your life in this present wilderness on track, you need to orient it constantly around the presence of God. You need to seek his face daily, reading his Word, the place where he promises to meet with us and communicate to us by his Spirit, just as the Israelites went individually to the Tent of Meeting to seek the Lord (**Exodus 33:7**). However, the primary focus of the tabernacle was not as an individual meeting place with God. The tabernacle was the place of corporate worship, where the tribes of Israel worshiped together. There is no place for becoming isolated in the wilderness: isolated believers will die alone in the desert. We need each other and the encouragement and challenge that comes from the church gathered together.

Chuck Huckaby: This reflection on the book of Numbers is an attempt to biblically ground our understanding of **spiritual warfare** in this reality: In the midst of spiritual warfare, God's covenant faithfulness is the source of our hope and strength. . .

Yet the truth we are accountable to follow is that, as Christ's followers, we are God's holy warriors who surround His throne and strive to accomplish His will on earth as is done in heaven. Our source of hope and strength in the face of Satan's harsh, pungent breath and odious threats is not the self-glorifying "experience" of some minister who may or may not have wrestled with Satan and comes away spouting "fighting tips" to which the Bible is a stranger. Instead, as James says, we are to "*submit to God*" and only then to "*resist the Devil*" (**James 4:7**). But even our submission to God is more than mere lip service or a casual prayer in a restaurant. This submission is a recasting of our worldview in light of the shape of God's purposes in the unfolding of His kingdom. Our hope is in the covenant faithfulness of the God who shows His love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments (**Ex. 20: 17**).

R. K. Harrison: The book of Numbers is of pivotal importance for all OT study because it covers the formative period of Israel's communal and religious life. During a four-decade interlude, the fledgling nation was given its characteristic structure as a group of Hebrew tribes that had been unified by the covenant at Sinai. Subsequently, the Israelites were chastened for their lack of faith in the Lord's ability to provide for their needs, robbed of their fighting manhood to a significant extent through rebellion and disobedience, and finally disciplined into a military force that was to occupy the land of Canaan as their future homeland.

During this period Israel's religious life was shaped by the promulgation of many laws from God that would establish the nature of her worship and prepare her for a settled community life beyond the confines of the wilderness. Through their separation from the perversions of contemporary pagan nations, the Israelites were to be dedicated to God as a holy people, witnessing to the lofty moral and spiritual ideals of the Sinai covenant.

Dennis Cole: Transitional periods in the life of a nation often serve to define the character and future of that people, for they build upon earlier foundations and yet diverge into new arenas of livelihood, character, and constitution. In the analysis of the broad history of a given people, these intervals are pivotal in assessing major movements that illuminate the particulars of later epochs.

The Book of Numbers serves such a purpose both in the Pentateuch and in the larger presentation of the history of Israel. This focal document contains the recurrent themes of God's revelation to humankind through word, God's work in and through the lives of the patriarchs and their descendants, God's birthing of the nation, and God's blessing through the gift of a productive land. It includes the polar themes of inheritance and disinheritance, obedience and disobedience, and of unity and diversity (or disunity). Numbers anticipates both the inheritance of the land under Joshua's leadership and the internal and external conflicts of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Prophets such as Hosea and Jeremiah build upon the history and themes of this book, and the Psalmists occasionally refer to incidents contained within its pages. . .

The central and unifying **theme** of the Book of Numbers is the **faithfulness of God** to fulfill his promise to his people, even when they rebel against him. Moses and not Aaron is the central human figure, even in the setting forth of the primacy of the Levitical priesthood (**Num 17:1–13**).

The key motifs are as follows:

1. God at Work in Israel—God is at work in history via his presence and providential purpose.
2. Tribal Community—Unity and disunity are the polar structures of the tribal coalition: unity is evident when they are obedient to Yahweh; disunity, when in rebellion. This differentiation anticipates future discontent and disharmony.
3. Journey of Faith—The journey theology of Genesis, which keeps Israel in pursuit of the dream by faith. Identification is made with the patriarchal ancestors.
4. Rebellion—Rebellion among God's people will be judged. The past and present examples anticipate a future history of contention with God.
5. Land and People—They pursue the promise, but they reject it and then later prepare for entry into the Land. "The promise of land proleptically fulfilled for each generation."⁶²
6. Promise and Fulfillment—God will work on behalf of his people to fulfill his promises, even among a rebellious generation.
7. Priests and Levites—The priests and Levites serve a key cultic role on behalf of God for the community of faith.
8. Purification Rites—Purification ritual delineation is needed to prevent and atone for defilement.
9. Wilderness Motif—The wilderness motif provides Israelite history with a model of purification in the wilderness setting.
10. Numerous Descendants—The blessing of progeny extends throughout the generations. Twice the census taking evidences God's richest blessing upon the people, fulfilling the promise of

numerous descendants.

11. God's Leaders—Leadership is needed among God's people to carry out his work in an orderly manner. The motif of leadership in matters of administration and cult obtain in Moses succeeded by Joshua and Aaron followed by Eleazar. But even God's chosen leaders may fall.

Irving Jensen: Desert Wanderings

The next thirty-seven years or more were transitional years in the history of the nation of Israel. .

The history of Numbers records very few events of these transitional years, for in a real sense they were years of void; one generation of Israel's sacred history was quickly dying off, and its rising youth as yet had no history at all. But though the period lacked in events, it did not lack in its significance as a transitional period.

Geographically. The people neither advanced nor retreated geographically; rather, they wandered aimlessly about the wilderness and desert areas, between Kadesh and the Red Sea (**Nu 14:25**), consuming the years of God's calendar of judgment. Some of the names of the camping places are listed in **Nu 33:19–36**. When the judgment years came to a close, the nation returned to Kadesh (**Nu 20:1**), ready then to advance toward Canaan.

Population. The thirty-seven years produced the major population change. The 600,000 warriors met their appointed death over the space of the years, some by violent causes (**16:49**), and were buried in the wilderness—daily reminders of God's great judgment. Children and youth under twenty years of age grew up, were married, and reared children; and by the end of the wandering years, a new generation of the seed of Abraham had appeared.

Spiritually. In a spiritual sense, new seeds of hope were sown, the original covenant and promise reaffirmed, and preparation for entering God's land renewed. For this spiritual ministry among the people, God still had His servants, Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons, the Levites, Joshua, and Caleb. The next chapters of Numbers put into focus the major spiritual issues of these transitional years.

Ray Stedman: In Numbers we have dramatically set forth what is perhaps the hardest lesson a Christian has to learn -- to trust God instead of his own reason. This is where we struggle, isn't it? We think that what we want to do and the way we want to do it is the right way. The hardest struggle we have, even as these Israelites had, is to learn to believe that God knows what he is talking about and that what he tells us is the truth, and is for our good, and to operate on that basis despite what friends and others around are telling us concerning the right way. Proverbs puts it so graphically, "*There is a way which seems right to a man, and its end is the way to death.*" (**Pr 14:12**) The book of Numbers is a picture of that experience in the believer. You will recognize, of course, that it is the experience of **Romans 7** where the unhappy, defeated Christian, who is his own worst enemy, is being disciplined by God because God as a father loves him. He is experiencing in the midst of this discipline the fatherly love and care of God and protection from his enemy. That is what the book of Numbers portrays. It is a picture of people who have come out of Egypt but who have not yet reached Canaan. They had the faith to follow God out of the bondage and slavery of sin but have not yet come into the fullness of liberty and

rest in the Holy Spirit -- Canaan being a picture of the Spirit-filled life.

Wenham: It is impossible to discuss the theology of Numbers in isolation from the other books of the Pentateuch, particularly Exodus and Leviticus. The outward structural devices that link the three middle books of the Pentateuch point to an inner unity of theological theme that underlies them all. All are concerned with the outworking of the promises to Abraham and the moulding of Israel into the holy people of God. But the focus of interest in each book is different. Exodus concentrates on the deliverance from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai and the erection of the tabernacle. Leviticus highlights the nature of true worship and holiness. Numbers focuses on the land of promise and Israel's journey towards it. God's character and his reactions to Israel's behaviour are constant throughout these books, but different aspects come to the fore in different books. If Leviticus emphasizes the importance of holiness and cleanness, Numbers reiterates the value of faith and obedience. Where Leviticus stresses the role of sacrifice in creating and maintaining right relations between God and man, Numbers accentuates the indispensability of the priesthood for preserving the nation's spiritual health. Yet these contrasts are not incompatible with one another. It is through obedience to the law that Israel is sanctified, and without priests there can be no sacrifice. The theological emphases of the different books do not contradict but complement one another. . .

Fundamental to Israel's experience was the real and visible presence of God among them. In one sense God was ever present with Israel; the recurrent refrain in the laws of Leviticus, 'I am the Lord your God', is a reminder that every deed is done unto the Lord. But Numbers speaks of God's frequent visible presence with his people during their wilderness wanderings. The fiery cloud covering the tabernacle showed that it was no empty royal palace, but that *'the Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them'* (23:21). Wherever the cloud went the people followed; when the cloud stopped moving on, the people camped (9:15–23). So impressive was this phenomenon that not only did the Mesopotamian seer Balaam recognize it, but so did the Egyptians and Canaanites according to 14:14: *'They have heard that thou, O Lord, art in the midst of this people; for thou, O Lord, art seen face to face, and thy cloud stands over them and thou goest before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.'* Ultimately it would lead them to the land of promise which would be hallowed by the presence of God living among his people (35:34). The moving cloud and the ark were images of God going with his people to protect them and give them victory over their foes (10:33–36). In their absence defeat was inevitable (14:43–44). More ominous still, the cloud appeared in moments of crisis, when the people protested against the divinely appointed leadership or the planned journey into Canaan. The cloud's sudden appearance heralded some dire punishment on the wicked (11:25, cf. 33; 12:5, 10; 14:10; 16:19, 42; 20:6).

Timothy Ashley: Structure

Most commentators have structured Numbers in three sections related to geographic locale: section I at Mt. Sinai (1:1–10:10); section II at and around Kadesh-barnea (10:11–19:22), and section III on the plains of Moab (20:1–36:13). This kind of structure involves two travel sections: the first from Sinai to Kadesh-barnea (10:11–12:13), and the second from Kadesh-barnea to the plains of Moab (20:1–21:35). The venue of section I is the same as that for **Exod. 20–Lev. 27** and hence links Numbers with the central books in the Pentateuch. . .

The themes of obedience, disobedience, holiness, and the presence of God are keys to understanding the book of Numbers. For purposes of **thematic** discussion it will be helpful to break the book into three constituent parts: Orientation (**1:1–10:10**), Disorientation (**10:11–22:1**), and New Orientation (**22:1–36:13**). The travel sections (**10:11–12:16; 20:1–22:1**) are transitional.

Roy Gane: In addition to the two census lists, **D. Olson** has found an impressive series of other connections between chapters **1–25** and **26–36**, which “strengthen the argument for a cohesive editorial construction of the book into two major parts that both echo and contrast with each other.”

Numbers 1–25	Numbers 26–36
The Old Generation of Rebellion	The New Generation of Hope
1 —census of twelve tribes	26 —census of twelve tribes
3 —census of Levites	26 —census of Levites
5 —legal discourse involving women	27 —legal discourse involving women
6 —laws concerning vows	30 —laws concerning vows
7, 15 —lists and laws concerning offerings	28, 29 —lists and laws concerning offerings
9 —celebration of Passover	28:16–25 —instructions for future celebrations of Passover
10:8–9 —law concerning priests blowing trumpets to sound alarm for holy war	31:6 —priests blow trumpets to sound alarm for holy war against Midian
13 —list of spies from twelve tribes chosen to spy out the Promised Land	34 —list of tribal leaders from twelve tribes chosen to divide the Promised Land
13–14 —spy story and Israel’s rebellion that led to death of old generation	32:6–15 —spy story of Num. 13–14 recalled as lesson for new generation
10–25 —scattered geographical notations about places Israel journeyed in the desert	33 —summary of places Israel journeyed in the desert
18:21–32 —provisions for Levites	35 —provisions for Levitical cities
21:21–35 —victory over Kings Sihon and Og and capture of land east of Jordan	32 —assignment of land captured from Sihon and Og east of Jordan to Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh
25 —Midianites cause Israel to sin and God’s command to Israel to punish Midianites	31 —holy war against Midianites to punish them for what they did in ch. 25

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Here are 14 Lessons from The Book of Numbers

1) A God of Order -- Numbers 9.15-23

When the cloud that covered the scared tent moved, the Israelites packed up camp and followed it. When the cloud stopped, the people stopped and set up camp again. This provides a simple, but important, lesson for our relationship with God. When God moves, we should move; when he stops, we stop.

Today, God does not usually guide us by clouds, but he does guide us with his Word, prayer, and the counsel of his ministers and other believers. When we follow God's guidance, we know that we are where he wants us to be.

The question we should ask is, "What does God want me to learn from my current situation?:"

The answer is there if we look for it.

2) Complain, Complain, Complain! -- Numbers 11.1-35

Only three days into their renewed journey, the Israelites began complaining again. They whined about how much better life had been in Egypt, apparently forgetting all the misery they had suffered as slaves. Incredible as it may seem, they also forgot about the many miracles the LORD had already performed to help them during their travels.

How easily we, too, become discouraged when life does not go our way. We often overlook the many good things God provides for us. God did not tolerate grumbling from the Israelites and he does not want us to waste our time complaining either. Instead, we should be thankful for the way God is taking care of us, day by day.

3) Jealousy in the Family -- Numbers 12.1-16

Aaron and Miriam resented Moses' leadership. Their complaints about his wife were simply a smoke-screen to hide the real problem. The Lord quickly let Moses' brother and sister know that they were not on the same terms with him as Moses was. Although the Lord rebuked both Miriam and Aaron, Miriam alone was struck with leprosy.

This passage shows that we should be very careful about Criticizing our spiritual leaders. Just like us, they are imperfect people who sometimes say and do foolish things. While they must be held accountable for their actions, we should be sure of our motives before we point an accusing finger at spiritual leaders. What does God see in our hearts? Are we acting out of true concern for someone else, or because we are jealous?

Notice that Moses did not hold a grudge but prayed for Miriam to be healed. When someone wrongly criticized us, we can be as forgiving as Moses when we let God guide our hearts.

4) God Does Not Play Games -- Numbers 14.11-38

Our Patient God never quits loving his people. He mercifully forgives us again and again. But when his people refuse to trust and obey him, the Lord allows them to go their own way ... Which always leads to destruction.

God forgave the Israelites when Moses prayed for them, but that did not change the consequences for their sin. They had refused to trust him one time too many. Of the more than 600,000 men who came out of Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb were allowed to enter Canaan.

Today we must be careful about presuming the Lord will be kind. If God has disciplined us for sins, we should learn from our mistakes and recommit ourselves to trusting God for a great future.

6) Deliberate Sin -- Numbers 15.22-31

When God's people sinned accidentally, the Lord promised to forgive them if they admitted their errors and offered sacrifices. Deliberate sin, however, was dealt with much more severely.

Although God hates all sin, there is a big difference between unintentionally and willfully

wanting to do what is wrong. God sees not only what we have done, but he knows why we have done it.

God knows that his children are not perfect; we all sin. But he expects us to think carefully about our actions and get in the habit of choosing right over wrong.

6) With All Your Heart! -- Numbers 17.12, 13

How could the Israelites have complained again after God had been so good to them? Apparently, they were divided between wanting to obey God and worrying about their own physical needs.

Most of us have experienced a similar tug-of-war. We know we should do one thing, but we do the opposite. Besides, many people consider complaining to be normal in this world of "looking out for Number One." Complaining, though is a sign of ingratitude and it separates us from God. When we feel like complaining, let's stop and thank God for what he has done for us and given us.

7) Be Careful with God's Gifts -- Numbers 18.32

The Priests were instructed to treat the gifts and sacrifices that were brought by the people with respect. Today, we offer gifts to God when we give our time and money to our churches.

Those responsible for handling these gifts should do so with great care. They must be thoughtful in how they handle the church's money and resources, and ask for God's guidance. Someday, we will all have to answer to God for what we have done with his resources. He deserves the very best from us.

8) Why did Moses Get So Mad? -- Numbers 20.12

Moses lived with the stress of leading people who often complained and rebelled. We cannot blame him for getting angry and frustrated. When Moses hit the rock with his walking stick, the people got their water, and Moses got some relief.

But Moses' end result did not justify his means. God had instructed Moses to speak to the rock and command water to come out of it. Instead, Moses struck the rock, which was against what God commanded. Was God too harsh with Moses? As the leader of the Israelites, Moses had the responsibility to set a good example for them. He did not do this here.

God's instructions are never to be taken lightly. Yes, he is merciful and loving, but he also means what he says. The Bible tells us that God is always working for our good. We hurt him and ourselves when we disobey him.

9) Winning with God -- Numbers 21.21-35

After the hard lessons the Israelites had recently learned, they were due some encouragement. In this passage, King Sihon and King Og may have assumed that this ragged band of nomads would be a pushover, but they were in for a big surprise. Their opponent wasn't Israel - It was the Lord of all the earth!

These battles are wonderful examples of how God continually fights for his people in all circumstances. We can be assured that he will do no less for us.

10) The Promised Christ -- Numbers 24. 1-25

Even a donkey (ch. 22) seemed to have had more sense than Balaam, a prophet who sold himself for money (see Jude 11). Yet, God's Spirit "took control of him" (24.2) and used Balaam to speak a message to the Israelites.

The first part of the message is a blessing for the people, but an even more promising message follows in verses 17-19. Balaam tells of the coming Messiah, who is described as "a star" (v. 17). This coming Christ would a blessing to all nations.

11) When is Anger Appropriate? -- Numbers 25. 1-15

When Zimri worshiped a Moabite god, he directly opposed the Lord. Phinnahs knew about Zimri's sin and was angry, so he did what God had said to do to those who had committed this sin. He killed Zimri.

Does this mean all anger and our resulting actions are justified? If God's name is at stake then anger is the power response. Rarely, though, is violence the power reaction for our anger. We must be careful about how we express anger. Let's pray that God will show us how to respond with calm wisdom rather than violence when we confront sin.

12) Times of Renewal -- Numbers 29.1

The celebrations mentioned in this chapter provided specific times for the people to be refreshed spiritually, mentally, and physically. Occasionally we may feel like we are far from God. Taking some time out of our busy schedules and spending it with God will help renew our physical energy as well as our commitment to the Lord. When we set aside a special time to spend with God, we will be amazed at how he renews us, from the inside out.

13) Keeping Promises -- Numbers 30. 1-16

Someone once said that promises were made to be broken. In biblical times, though, a person's word carried a lot of weight. Keeping a promise demonstrated an honest and devoted heart that pleased the Lord. Breaking a promise could ruin a person's relationship with God, as well as his or her peers.

It is easy for us to offhandedly promise something and then break the promise. Perhaps excitement has caused us to say more than we meant to, but that's no excuse.

Number 30. 1-16 shows us that we must be especially careful about making rash promises. If we make a commitment, God expects us to keep it.

14) Lessons Learned -- Numbers 36.13

The Israelites were finally done wandering through the desert. They had arrived near the banks of the Jordan River. the land God promised them may actually have been within their view.

God's people had learned some hard lessons since their parents had crossed the Red Sea forty

years ago. They had seen the results of not believing in God. They knew that disobedience and complaining would bring trouble.

The Israelites would follow God's instructions, and keep their faith in him. These are good lessons for God's people to remember today.

Richard Baxter: In Numbers we see the **severity** of God, in the old generation which fell in the wilderness and never entered Canaan. We see the **goodness** of God, in the new generation which was protected, preserved, and provided for, until Canaan was possessed. In the one case we see the awful inflexibility of the Divine justice. In the other case we see the unfailing faithfulness of God to His promise, His purpose, His people.

Closely running up to this central message of the book are two other lessons – two warnings to ourselves; and these also may be expressed in words from the New Testament. The first is a warning against **presumption**. Turning again to the Corinthian passage which we have just quoted in full (**1 Cor. x. 1-12**), we find that this warning against presumption is the lesson which Paul himself sees in the book of Numbers. After telling us that “all these things happened unto them as types” for us, he says: “*Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.*”

The second warning is against unbelief. In **Hebrews iii. 19** we read: “*They could not enter in (to Canaan) because of unbelief*”; and then it is added – “*Let us therefore fear lest, a promise being left us of entering into His rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.*” And again “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (iii.12).

Thus the New Testament itself interprets the book of Numbers for us. This fourth writing of Moses says:

1. “*Behold the goodness and severity of God.*”
2. “*Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed . . .*”
3. “*Take heed lest there be in you – unbelief.*”

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PREPARING FOR THE LORD'S BATTLE

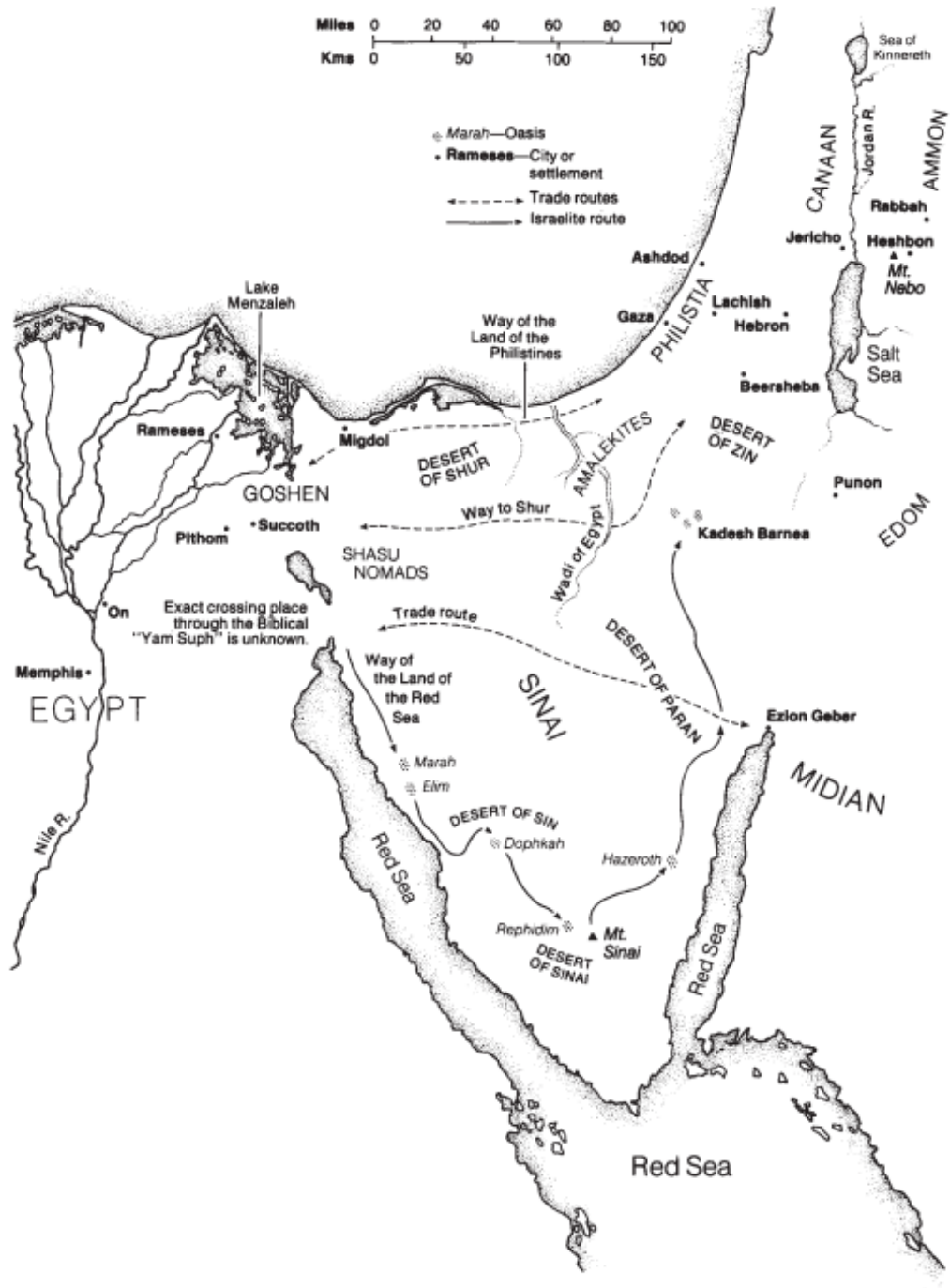
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Numbers 1-36

<p>MOBILIZING HIS PEOPLE GETTING READY TO POSSESS THE LAND</p> <p><u>STRUCTURING</u> <i>Packing your duffle bag</i></p>	<p>DISPLEASED WITH HIS PEOPLE STEPS TO DISQUALIFY YOURSELF FROM SERVING GOD</p> <p><u>TESTING</u> <i>Giving up the mission</i></p>	<p>READYING A NEW GENERATION AN EXAMINATION OF THEIR READINESS TO ENTER THE LORD'S LAND</p> <p><u>ENDURING</u> <i>Passing the Entrance Exam</i></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Census for warriors Tribal positions & leaders Census for Levites Levitical duties Purification laws Nazirite law Purification of leaders Purification of Levites Celebration of Passover Setting out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complaining spirit Jealousy for leadership Evil report of 10 spies Rebellion against the Lord Clarifying laws for Levites Coup by Korah & priests Resolving the coup Various offering laws Purification laws Preparing for new leaders Serpents bite complainers Balaam rebuked by Lord Balaam's first 2 blessings Balaam's last 2 blessings Israel's harlotry The new census Moses asks for leader Laws for offerings Laws for seventh month Laws for vows Striking the Midianites Reuben & Gad's portion Record of their journeys Border of the Land Cities of Refuge & murder Inheritance laws 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numbers 1-9 At Mt. Sinai MOVE OUT! <i>A Time of mobilizing the people and clarifying the law.</i>
<p>Numbers 10-19 In the wilderness</p> <p>YOU'RE DISQUALIFIED!</p> <p><i>A Test of Their Faithfulness to their Lord's Commands</i></p>	<p>Numbers 20-36 By the Jordan</p> <p>ON WITH THE SHOW!</p> <p><i>A Readying of the Second Generation to Accomplish the Mission their Parents Refused to Fulfill.</i></p>	

Numbers: The Basic Training of God's Army																																																	
The Army's Order Planned						The Army's Disorder Dealt With						The Army Made Ready for Conquest																																					
Mount Sinai						Wilderness						Plains of Moab																																					
Duration = 20 days						Duration = 38 years 3 months and 10 days						Duration = About 5 months																																					
1:1-----10:36						11:1-----25:18						26:1-----36:13																																					
1	Identification of resources Census	2	Organization for mobilization Army Camp	3-4	The faith of the army Levites	5:1-6:21	The purity of the army Special laws	6:22-9:14	The empowering of the army Blessing and worship	9:15-10:36	The commander of the army Guidance from God	11:1-3	Murmuring at Taberah	11:4-35	Murmuring at Kibroth-Hattavaah	12:1-16	Insurrection at Hazeroth	13:1-14:45	Crisis at Kadesh	15-16	Rebellion of Korah & cong.	17-19	Re-establishing authority	20	Crisis over water	21:1-3	2 nd generation tested in war	21-4-9	2 nd generation tested in heart	21:10-24:25	2 nd generation tested with demonic attacks	25	2 nd generation tested with sex	26:1-27:11	2 nd generation leadership and inheritance	27:12-30:16	Authority in civics (27:12-23), church (28-29) & family (30)	31	2 nd generation tested in battle	32	Inheritance & commitment	33:1-49	Review of the past	33:50-56	Call to conquer	34-35	Establishing boundaries	36	Laws of family inheritance

Map of the Exodus



OUTLINE OF NUMBERS

DISCONTENT, UNBELIEF AND FAILURE MOBILIZING GOD'S TROOPS FOR CONQUEST

PERSISTENT COMPLAINING, UNBELIEF AND RESISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP DELAY THE MOBILIZATION OF GOD'S TROOPS FOR CONQUEST AND POSSESSION OF THE PROMISED LAND

I. (1:1 – 10:36) FIRST GENERATION OF GOD'S TROOPS MOBILIZED FOR CONQUEST –

FOCUSING ON OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS

LOCATION = MOUNT SINAI

DURATION = 20 DAYS

A. (1:1 – 4:49) ORGANIZATION OF THE MILITARY TROOPS

1. (1:1-54) Census of the Military Troops – Men of War

a. (:1-19) Command to Take the Census

b. (:20-46) Conducting of the Census by Tribe

1) (:20-21) Sons of Reuben	- 46,500
2) (:22-23) Sons of Simeon	- 59,300
3) (:24-25) Sons of Gad	- 45,650
4) (:26-27) Sons of Judah	- 74,600
5) (:28-29) Sons of Issachar	- 54,400
6) (:30-31) Sons of Zebulun	- 57,400
7) (:32-33) Sons of Joseph	- 40,500
8) (:34-35) Sons of Manasseh	- 32,200
9) (:36-37) Sons of Benjamin	- 35,400
10) (:38-39) Sons of Dan	- 62,700
11) (:40-41) Sons of Asher	- 41,500
12) (:42-43) Sons of Naphtali	- 53,400
13) (:44-46) Summary	- 603,550

c. (:47-54) Consecrated Duties for Exempt Tribe of Levites

2. (2:1-34) Geographical Organization of the Military Camp by Tribe

a. (:1-2) Introduction

b. (:3-9) East Side – Judah, Issachar, Zebulum - 186,400

c. (:10-16) South Side – Reuben, Simeon, Gad - 151,450

d. (:17) Centralization of Tabernacle - Transported by the Levites

e. (:18-24) West Side – Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin - 108,100

f. (:25-31) North Side – Dan, Asher, Naphtali - 157,600

g. (:32-34) Summary – Special Case of the Levites - 603,550

3. (3:1 – 4:49) Consecrated Service of the Levites (Assisting the Priests)
 - a. (3:1-13) Identification, Role and Divine Ownership of the Levites
 - 1) (:1-4) Identification of the Levites
 - 2) (:5-10) Role of the Levites
 - 3) (:11-13) Divine Ownership of the Levites
 - b. (3:14 – 4:49) Numbering and Duties of the Male Levites by Family
 - 1) (3:14-39) All Males
 - a) (:14-20) Introduction to the Levite Families
 - b) (:21-26) Numbering and Duties of the Gershonites - 7,500
 - c) (:27-32) Numbering and Duties of the Kohathites - 8,600
 - d) (:33-37) Numbering and Duties of the Merarites - 6,200
 - e) (:38) Role of Moses and Aaron and His Sons
 - f) (:39) Summary of Numbering of the Levites - 22,000
 - 2) (3:40-51) Firstborn Redeemed
 - 3) (4:1-49) Males - Ages 30-50
 - a) (:1-33) Duties of the Levite Families
 - 1)) (:1-20) Duties of the Kohathites
 - 2)) (:21-28) Duties of the Gershonites
 - 3)) (:29-33) Duties of the Merarites
 - b) (:34-49) Numbering of the Levite Families
 - 1)) (:34-37) Numbering of the Kohathites - 2,750
 - 2)) (:38-41) Numbering of the Gershonites - 2,630
 - 3)) (:42-45) Numbering of the Merarites - 3,200
 - 4)) (:46-49) Summary of the Numbering - 8.580

B. (5:1 – 6:21) PURITY AND SEPARATION OF THE MILITARY TROOPS

1. (5:1-31) Purity of the Military Troops – Avoiding Defilement
 - a. (:1-4) Avoiding Physical Defilement
 - b. (:5-10) Avoiding Interpersonal Relationship Defilement
 - c. (:11-31) Avoiding Marriage Defilement
2. (:6:1-21) Separation of the Military Troops – Via Nazarite Vow
 - a. (:1-8) Requirements of Separation
 - 1) (:1-2) General Introduction: Remain Dedicated to the Lord
 - 2) (:3-4) Avoiding Consuming Grape Products
 - 3) (:5) Avoiding Cutting of Hair
 - 4) (:6-7) Avoiding Physical Contact with Dead Body
 - 5) (:8) General Summary: Remain Holy to the Lord
 - b. (:9-12) Renewal of Separation Vow if Defiled
 - c. (:13-21) Ratification of Fulfilled Separation

C. (6:22-27) GOD’S BLESSING ON THE MILITARY TROOPS – AARON’S BENEDICTION -- THE BLESSED PRESENCE OF GOD’S PROTECTION, FAVOR AND PEACE MEETS ALL OF THE NEEDS OF THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY

- (:22-23) Prologue – Command to Bless Israel
- 1. (:24) God’s Blessing and Protection
- 2. (:25) God’s Favor and Grace
- 3. (:26) God’s Presence and Peace
- (:27) Epilogue – Promise to Bless Israel

D. (7:1 – 9:14) RELIGIOUS INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE MILITARY TROOPS

- 1. (7:1-89) Instructions Regarding the Offerings of the Tribal Leaders
- 2. (8:1-4) Instructions Regarding the Seven Lamps
- 3. (8:5-22) Instructions Regarding the Cleansing of the Levites
- 4. (8:23-26) Instructions Regarding the Length of Service of the Levites
- 5. (9:1-14) Instructions Regarding the Observance of Passover

E. (9:15 - 10:36) GUIDANCE FOR THE MILITARY TROOPS

- 1. (9:15-23) Guidance from the Cloud and Fire Representing the Presence of the Lord -- Guidance for the Departure and the Encampment of the Israelite Troops was Provided by the Cloud and the Fire Signifying the Presence of God

- a. (:15-16) Phenomena of the Cloud and the Fire Signifying the Presence of God

- 1) (:15) Appearance of the Cloud and the Fire
- 2) (:16a) Consistent Pattern of the Cloud and the Fire
- 3) (:16b) Appearance of the Cloud and the Fire

3 Descriptions of the Lord’s Guidance:

- b. (:17-18) Description #1: Departure and Encampment Regulated by the Lord – Emphasis on Divine Guidance Dictating Israel’s Movements

- 1) (:17) Function of Guidance Provided by the Cloud of God’s Presence
- 2) (:18) Regulation of Guidance Provided by the Command of the Lord

- c. (:19-22) Description #2: Encampment and Departure Regulated by the Lord – Emphasis on the Unpredictable Nature of the Divine Plan

- 1) (:19) Necessity of Patience vs. Presumption
- 2) (:20) Encampment Might Last a Few Days – Uncertainty of Timing
- 3) (:21) Encampment Might Be Very Short – Urgency of Moving Out
- 4) (:22) Encampment Might Last for a Long Time – Hold Your Water

- d. (:23) Description #2: Encampment and Departure Regulated by the Lord – Emphasis on Consistent Obedience to the Lord’s Command

- 1) Guidance
- 2) Obedience

- 2. (10:1-10) Guidance from the Silver Signal Trumpets for Worship and Mobilization – God Communicates His Favorable Presence with His Redeemed People via Clear Signals

- a. (:1-2) Primary Use of the Silver Signal Trumpets

- 1) (:2a) Two Silver Trumpets Commissioned
- 2) (:2b) Two Main Purposes = Worship and Mobilization

- b. (:3-7) Specific Instructions Regarding the Silver Signal Trumpets

- 1) (:3-4) Regarding Summoning
 - 2) (:5-6) Regarding Mobilizing
 - 3) (:7) No Alarm Sounded When Calling the Assembly
 - c. (:8) Blowing the Silver Signal Trumpets Restricted to Aaronic Priesthood
 - 1) Restriction Commanded
 - 2) Restriction Perpetuated
 - d. (:9-10) Additional Use of the Silver Signal Trumpets – Fighting and Feasting
 - 1) (:9) Fighting -- Going to War against Invading Enemies
 - 2) (:10) Feasting - Celebrating Appointed Feasts and New Moon Festivals
3. (10:11-36) Guidance Directing the Military Troops to Depart from Mt. Sinai -- Divine Guidance Directs the Israelites to Break Camp at Sinai and Begin Their Journey to the Promised Land
- a. (:11-13) Time to Move Out in Obedience to the Lord – The Launch of the March = the Departure from Sinai to Paran
 - 1) (:11-12a) Lifting of the Cloud from the Wilderness of Mt. Sinai
 - 2) (:12b) Settling Down of the Cloud in the Wilderness of Paran
 - 3) (:13) Moving in Accordance with God’s Guidance
 - b. (:14-28) Importance of Maintaining the Order Prescribed by the Lord to Equip Them for Warfare as They Focus on His Presence – The Organization of the March
 - 1) (:14-16) Camp of Judah
 - 2) (:17) Transportation of the Tabernacle
 - 3) (:18-20) Camp of Reuben
 - 4) (:21) Role of the Kohathites with the Holy Objects
 - 5) (:22-24) Camp of Ephraim
 - 6) (:25-27) Camp of Dan
 - 7) (:28) Summary
 - c. (:29-36) Three Key Types of Assistance That Will Contribute to Victory – The Reinforcements for the March
 - 1) (:29-32) Soliciting the Scouting Assistance of Hobab Who Knows the Terrain
 - 2) (:33-34) Focusing on the Visible Reminders of the Presence of the Lord that Provided Protection and Guidance During This Three Day Journey
 - 3) (:35-36) Sounding the Rallying Battle Cry that Invokes God’s Dominion

II. (11:1 – 25:18) DELAY DUE TO PERSISTENT COMPLAINING, UNBELIEF AND RESISTANCE TO LEADERSHIP –

FOCUSING ON TESTING, UNBELIEF AND FAILURE

LOCATION = WILDERNESS

DURATION = 38 YEARS 3 MONTHS AND 10 DAYS

A. (11:1 – 20:29) WINDING DOWN OF FIRST GENERATION

1. (11:1 – 12:16) Series of Complaints Representing Crises of Authority

- a. (11:1-3) General Complaints of the People (Associated with Taberah) about Hard Times Against the Backdrop of Faithful Providential Care
 - 1) (:1a) God Hears Our Complaining When We Fail the Test of Adversity
 - a) Adversity Will Come as a Test from the Lord – Expect Hard Times
 - b) Complaining Dishonors the Character of God – Choose Contentment
 - c) Complaining (in Heart or Tongue) is Never Hidden from the Lord
 - 2) (:1b) God Hates Our Complaining and Responds in Anger
 - a) Divine Response of Anger
 - b) Discipline of Consuming Fire
 - 3) (:2) God Halts His Discipline When Intercession is Effectual
 - a) Appeal to the Mediator
 - b) Effectual Intercession
 - c) Divine Relief
 - (:3) Epilogue – Remember the Consequences of Complaining
- b. (11:4-23) Complaints about Meat and Subsequent Leadership Issues (Associated with Kibroth-hattaavah) -- Confidence in the Sufficiency of God’s Power to Meet Needs is the Antidote to All Complaining and to Frustration in Leadership
 - 1) (:4-9) Complaint of the People Regarding the Boring Diet of Manna
 - a) (:4) Contagious Spirit of Discontent – Give Us Meat to Eat
 - 1)) Grumbling Begins with the Craving of the Foreign Malcontents
 - 2)) Grumbling Extends to the Forgetful Covenant Company of the Redeemed
 - b) (:5-6) Perverted Attitude of Ingratitude – We Used to be Better Off
 - 1)) (:5) Distorted Memory of the Good Old Days
 - 2)) (:6) Disinterested Perspective Towards God’s Gracious Provision
 - c) (:7-9) Reminder of God’s Gracious Provision of Manna
 - 1)) (:7) Distinctive Nature
 - 2)) (:8a) Disciplined Routine of Gathering and Preparation
 - 3)) (:8b) Delightful Taste
 - 4)) (:9) Daily Distribution
 - 2) (:10-15) Complaint of Moses Regarding the Frustration of Leadership
 - a) (:10) Burnout of Moses – Exasperated by the Response of Both the People and the Lord
 - 1)) Exasperated by the Response of the People
 - 2)) Exasperated by the Response of the Lord
 - b) (:11) Gripe of Moses – I Deserve Better Treatment

- 1)) You are Being Too Hard on Me
 - 2)) You are Not Giving Me Enough Credit
 - c) (:12) Blame Shifting of Moses
 - 1)) I Didn't Create This Situation
 - 2)) I Didn't Lead Us to This Point
 - d) (:13-14) Inadequacy of Moses
 - 1)) (:13) Inadequate to Meet the Needs of the People = Provide the Requested Meat
 - 2)) (:14) Inadequate to Bear the Burden of Leadership
 - e) (:15) Depression and Despair of Moses
- 3) (:16-20) Response of the Lord
 - a) (:16-17) Response to the Burdensome Nature of Leadership = Mercy of Shared Leadership
 - 1)) (:16) Delegating Additional Leaders
 - 2)) (:17) Empowering Additional Leaders
 - b) (:18-20) Response to the Demand for Meat = Grace of Provision Ending in Curse of Excess
 - 1)) (:18a) Serious Confrontation – Be Careful How You Approach the Lord
 - 2)) (:18b) Ungrateful and Perverted Complaint
 - 3)) (:18c-20a) Excessive Provision = Essentially Turning a Blessing Into Discipline
 - 4)) (:20c) Key Point of Failure = Not Trusting the Providential Care of the Lord
- 4) (:21-23) Key Issue = The Sufficiency of God's Power to Meet All Needs in Accordance with His Promise
 - a) (:21-22) Questioning the Lord's Capability to Meet the Need
 - 1)) (:21) God's Claim of Sufficiency is Difficult to Believe When the Needs are Enormous
 - 2)) (:22) Apart from Faith, Sufficient Resources Are Not Visible
 - b) (:23) Confidence in the Lord's Power to Meet the Need
 - 1)) The Lord is Up to the Challenge
 - 2)) The Lord Always Keeps His Promises
- c. (11:24-35) Resolving Complaints – God Deals Effectively with Frustration in Leadership and with the Sinful Complaints of Those Who Despise His Gracious Provision
 - 1) (:24-25) Distributing the Burden of Leadership
 - a) (:24) Preparing the Chosen Leaders
 - 1)) Importance of the Word of the Lord
 - 2)) Selection of the Chosen Leaders
 - 3)) Positioning of the Chosen Leaders
 - b) (:25a) Empowering the Chosen Leaders
 - 1)) Importance of the Word of the Lord
 - 2)) Gifting of the Holy Spirit

- c) (:25b) Authenticating the Chosen Leaders
 - 1)) Importance of the Word of the Lord
 - 2)) Isolated Instance of the Authenticating Experience
 - 2) (:26-30) Discerning the Legitimacy of Leadership
 - a) (:26) Unique Ministry of Eldad and Medad
 - 1)) Uniquely Separated from the Other Leaders
 - 2)) Uniquely Identified by Name
 - 3)) Uniquely Prophesying in the Camp
 - b) (:27) Unsettling Report
 - c) (:28-29) Contrasting Perspectives of Joshua and Moses – How to React?
 - 1)) (:28) Jealous Perspective of Joshua
 - 2)) (:29) Joyous Perspective of Moses
 - d) (:30) Resolution with Minimum of Drama
 - 3) (:31-34) Dealing with the Discontent Over God’s Provision
 - a) (:31-32) Provision of Meat as Demanded by the People – But in Excess
 - 1)) (:31) Miraculous Quantity of Quail
 - 2)) (:32) Method for Gathering and Processing
 - b) (:33-34) Plague of Destruction Tied to the Consumption of the Quail
 - 1)) (:33) Plague Executed
 - 2)) (:34) Plague Commemorated
- (:35) Epilogue / Transition
- d. (12:1-16) Murmuring of Miriam and Aaron (Associated with Hazereth) – Leadership Envy (Which Challenges God’s Authority) Receives God’s Discipline of Shame and Humiliation
 - 1) (:1-3) Leadership Envy – Rivals to the Leadership of Moses
 - a) (:1-2a) Attack on the Leadership of Moses
 - 1)) (:1) Criticism of Moses by Miriam and Aaron
 - 2)) (:2a) Self Promotion by Miriam and Aaron
 - b) (:2b) Expect a Response from the Lord
 - c) (:3) Don’t Expect a Response from Moses
 - 2) (:4-8) Divine Defense – Don’t Mess with Moses
 - a) (:4) Court Called into Session
 - b) (:5-6a) Supreme Judge Appears
 - 1)) (:5a) Impressive Presence
 - 2)) (:5b-6a) Impactful Proclamation
 - c) (:6b-8) Defense of the Divinely Appointed Leadership of Moses
 - 1)) (:6b-8a) Uniqueness of Role of Moses
 - 2)) (:8b) Ungodly Arrogance to Dare to Criticize Moses

- 3) (:9-15) Divine Disciple but Merciful Mitigation
 - a) (:9-10) The Angry Judgment
 - 1)) (:9) Display of God's Anger
 - 2)) (:10) Description of Judgment = Miriam Struck with Skin Disease
 - b) (:11-13) The Intercessory Appeal
 - 1)) (:11-12) Aaron Appeals to Moses
 - 2)) (:13) Moses Intercedes with God for Healing
 - c) (:14-15) The Merciful Mitigation of the Shameful Curse
 - 1)) (:14) Some Shame is Necessary – Healing and Humbling
 - 2)) (:15a) Cleansing and Isolation Limited to Seven Days
 - 3)) (:15b) Punishment Impacted the Entire Camp
- (:16) Epilogue – Geographical Transition
2. (13:1 – 14:45) Cowardly Report of the Spies and Rejection of the Promised Land
 - a. (13:1-33) Cowardly Report of the Spies -- Denying God's Assurance of Victory (Despite His Track Record of Faithfulness) Demonstrates a Surprising Failure of Faith
 - 1) (:1-24) Reconnaissance of the Spies – Define Your Mission from the Perspective of Faith
 - a) (:1-16) Commissioning the Spies (One Per Tribe) Per the Lord's Command
 - 1)) (:1-3) General Instructions
 - 2)) (:4-16a) Specific Names
 - 3)) (:16b) Renaming of Hoshea as Joshua
 - b) (:17-20) Charging the Spies to Gather Specific Intelligence
 - 1)) (:17) Location to Cover
 - 2)) (:18) Overall Mission = Scope out the Land and the People
 - 3)) (:19-20) Specific Data to Gather
 - c) (:21-24) Conducting the Mission
 - 1)) (:21) Scope of the Mission
 - 2)) (:22) Significance of the Residents of Hebron
 - 3)) (:23-24) Sample Cluster of Grapes
 - 2) (:25-33) Report and Recommendation of the Spies – Commit to Your Mission with the Eyes of Faith – Not with the Mentality of Grasshoppers
 - a) (:25-29) Intelligence Report from the Information Gathering Mission
 - 1)) (:25-26) Completion of the Assigned Mission
 - 2)) (:27-29) Specific Details of the Report
 - b) (:30-33) Two Contrasting Recommendations Regarding Prospects of Conquering Canaan

- 1)) (:30) Positive Recommendation – Overcomer
Mentality of Faith = Victory is Assured
- 2)) (:31-33) Negative Recommendation – Grasshopper
Mentality of Disbelief = We are Going to be Crushed
- b. (14:1-38) Rejection of the Promised Land -- Persistent Complaining Tests
the Limits of God's Patience But the Application of His Mercy and
Judgment Protect His Reputation
 - 1) (:1-10) Truculent Complaining Spreads the Contagion of Fear and
Panic – Refusing to Listen to the Voices of Reason and of Faith
 - a) (:1-4) Rebellion Against God's Appointed Leaders
 - 1)) (:1) Self-Pity – Woe is Me
 - 2)) (:2a) Community Grumbling
 - 3)) (:2b-3) Irrational Despair – Abandoning Reason
 - 4)) (:4) Foolish Decision Making – Abandoning Faith
 - b) (:5-10a) Rejection of the Voices of Reason and of Faith
 - 1)) (:5) Sober Reminder of the Fear of God
 - 2)) (:6-9) Last Chance to Listen to the Voices of
Reason and of Faith
 - 3)) (:10a) Angry Rejection of God's Faithful
Messengers
 - c) (:10b) Revelation of the Glory of God -- What Happens When
God Shows Up
 - 2) (:11-25) Tense Confrontation Regarding the Limits of God's
Patience – Mercy and Judgment Applied in Response to the Effectual
Intercession of Moses
 - a) (:11-12) Time for Dramatic Judgment – The Last Straw
 - 1)) (:11) Patience of God Severely Tested
 - 2)) (:12) Proposed Severe Judgment and Redirected
Blessing
 - b) (:13-19) Desperate Intercession by Moses
 - 1)) (:13-16) Plea Based on God's Glory
 - 2)) (:17-19) Plea Based on God's Loyal Love
 - c) (:20-25) Forgiveness Granted but Without Compromising
God's Glory
 - 1)) (:20) Announcement of Pardon
 - 2)) (:21) Proclamation of Glory
 - 3)) (:22-24) Disposition of the Land Promise
 - 4)) (:25) Instructions to Begin Their Wilderness
Wanderings
 - 3) (:26-38) Tragic Costs of Complaining Against the Lord –
Making the Punishment Fit the Crime
 - a) (:26-27) Complaining and Grumbling are Serious Offenses
 - 1)) Don't Presume Against the Lord's Patience
and Forbearance
 - 2)) Don't Presume that You Will Escape
Accountability

- b) (:28-35) Consequences Matched to the Complaints
 - 1)) (:28-29) Death in the Wilderness for All the Numbered Warriors
 - 2)) (:30) Exception Made for Faithful Caleb and Joshua
 - 3)) (:31-34) Next Generation Will Enter the Land after Painful 40 Year Delay
 - 4)) (:35) Guarantee of Fulfilment
 - c) (:36-38) Clear Distinction in Destiny Between the Unfaithful and the Faithful Spies
 - 1)) (:36-37) Destiny of the Unfaithful = Death Immediately by a Divine Plague
 - 2)) (:38) Destiny of the Faithful – Life Ongoing into the Promised Land
 - c. (14:39-45) Presumption Leads to Failure in Spiritual Warfare – Devoid of God’s Favor, Presumption Recklessly Rushes Forward to Certain Spiritual Defeat
 - 1) (:39-40) Presumptive in Your Planning – Making Your Own Plans While Ignoring the Prerequisite of Holiness – Determination is Not Enough
 - a) (:39) Remorseful but Not Repentant
 - b) (:40) Determined but Driven by Self Will
 - 2) (:41-43) Purposeless in Your Pursuits – Not Following the Lord so Not Protected by His Presence – Defeat is Guaranteed
 - a) (:41) Disobedience Guarantees Defeat
 - b) (:42) Disregarding Divine Warnings Guarantees Defeat
 - 1)) Clear Warning
 - 2)) Key Factor
 - c) (:43) Denying the Obvious Guarantees Defeat
 - 1)) Enemy is Stronger and More Prepared
 - 2)) Defeat is Certain
 - 3)) God is Not on Your Side
 - 3) (:44-45) Powerless in Your Performance – Heading Undefended into a Beat Down – Defenseless is Reckless
 - a) (:44) Foolish Attack
 - 1)) Defiant of God’s Warnings
 - 2)) Devoid of God’s Favorable Presence and Powerful Leadership
 - b) (:45) Ferocious Beat Down
- 3. (15:1-41) Worship Requirements for Living in Canaan – Our Response to God’s Discipline will Confirm Us in Holiness as We:
 - Rejoice (Please) the Lord
 - Respect the Lord
 - Remember the Lord

- a. (:1-16) Rejoice (Please) the Lord – Offering Sacrifices of Covenant-Based Worship
 - 1) (:2-3) Offerings by Fire Commanded
 - a) (:2) Anticipating Fulfilment of the Land Promise
 - b) (:3) Approaching God via Various Sweet Savor Sacrifices
 - 2) (:4-7) Offerings Accompanied by Grain and Wine
 - 3) (:8-13) Offerings Further Regulated by the Lord
 - a) (:8-12) Proportions for the Sacrificial Regulations Specified
 - b) (:13) Purpose of Following the Sacrificial Regulations
 - 4) (:14-16) Same Standard for the Native Israelite and for the Foreigner
 - b. (:17-36) Respect the Lord – Showing Our Dedication and Obedience
 - 1) (:18-21) Respect the Lord by Your Gratitude and Loyalty – Bring Him Your Best -- Dedication
 - a) (:18-19) Our Offerings Reflect Our Gratitude for God’s Faithfulness
 - b) (:20-21) Our Offerings Reflect Our Loyalty for God’s Priority in Our Life
 - 2) (:22-36) Respect the Lord by Taking Sin Seriously – Purification Offering – Obedience
 - a) (:22-29) Obedience -- Dealing with Inadvertent Sins
 - b) (:30-36) Obedience -- Dealing with Intentional Sins of Defiance
 - c. (:37-41) Remember the Lord and His Commands – Respond to His Royal Rule with a Commitment to Holiness and Appreciation for Redemption
 - 1) (:38-40) Visual Aid to Encourage Obedience = Blue Tassels on Hems of Garments
 - a) (:38) Sewing of the Blue Tassels on the Garments
 - b) (:39-40) Significance of the Blue Tassels
 - 2) (:41) Vocal Testimony of God’s Role as Redeemer
4. (16:1 – 17:13) Legitimation of Aaron’s Priesthood
- a. (16:1-35) Revolt of Korah, Dathan and Abiram – Leadership Envy Stirs Up Unjustified Attacks that Bring Down the Hammer of Catastrophic Divine Judgment
 - 1) (:1-3) Leadership Envy – Rebellion Conspiracy Directed Against God and His Appointed Leaders
 - a) (:1-2) The Conspiracy
 - 1)) (:1) Leaders of the Conspiracy
 - 2)) (:2) Lieutenants of the Conspiracy
 - b) (:3) The Complaint = Self-Exaltation
 - 2) (:4-19) Leadership Confrontation – Response of Moses Sets Up the Ultimate Leadership Confrontation
 - a) (:4-11) Dealing with the Complaint of Korah
 - 1)) (:4) Renouncing Self Trust and Self Defense
 - 2)) (:5) Reality Test = Let the Lord Make the Choice
 - 3)) (:6-7) Rash Behavior = You Have Crossed the Line
 - 4)) (:8-10) Root Problem = Leadership Envy

- 5)) (:11) Rebellion is Actually Directed Against the Lord
- b) (:12-15) Dealing with the Complaint of Dathan and Abiram
 - 1)) (:12a) The Summons
 - 2)) (:12b-14) The Refusal
 - 3)) (:15) The Angry Appeal to the Lord
- c) (:16-19a) Dealing with the Logistics of the Confrontation
 - 1)) (:16-17) Man Up
 - 2)) (:18) Mano a Mano
 - 3)) (:19a) Multitude in Support
- d) (:19b) Deal Breaker = Presence of the Glory of the Lord
- 3) (:20-30) Litmus Test – Preparation for Divine Judgment to Settle the Confrontation
 - a) (:20-22) Intercession of Moses and Aaron
 - 1)) (:20-21) Anger of the Lord – Ready to Destroy the Entire Congregation
 - 2)) (:22) Argument of Moses and Aaron – Limit the Scope of Judgment
 - b) (:23-30) Imminent Judgment Warning
 - 1)) (:23-24) Divine Command to Issue the Warning
 - 2)) (:25-30) Declaration of Imminent Judgment
- 4) (:31-35) Last Word – Catastrophic Divine Judgment Silences the Rebellion
 - a) (:31-34) Seismic Swallowing – Unprecedented Catastrophe
 - 1)) (:31-32) Targeted Unprecedented Catastrophe
 - 2)) (:33) Terminal Unprecedented Catastrophe
 - 3)) (:34) Terrifying Unprecedented Catastrophe
 - b) (:35) Consuming Fire
- b. (16:36-50) False Mediator vs. True Mediator – Who Gets to Burn the Incense? The Work of Atonement and Propitiation Belong Only to the Divinely Appointed High Priest and Mediator
 - 1) (:36-40) False Mediators Lead Us Down the Pathway to Experiencing the Wrath of God – The Sign Created from the Censers of the Dead Usurpers to Highlight Holiness
 - a) (:36-38) Reclaim the Censers for God’s Holy Purpose
 - 1)) (:36-37) Noteworthy Aspect of the Censers = Holy to God
 - 2)) (:38) New Application for the Bronze Metal = Sign of God’s Holiness
 - b) (:39-40) Remind the Sons of Israel to Approach God Only on His Terms
 - 2) (:41-50) Only the True Mediator Can Save Us From God’s Wrath – The Efficacy of the Censer in the Hand of the True Priest
 - a) (:41) The Congregation: Accusing God’s Appointed Leaders Falsely
 - 1)) Slow Learners

- 2)) Safety in Numbers?? NO!
- 3)) Still Grumbling Against God's Appointed Leaders
- 4)) Shifting Blame
- b) (:42-45) The Lord: Addressing Moses with the Urgent Warning of Imminent Judgment
 - 1)) (:42) God Shows Up
 - 2)) (:43-45) God Warns Moses and Aaron
- c) (:46-50) Aaron (Instructed by Moses): Arresting the Plague by Making Atonement
 - 1)) (:46) Proper Use of Censer by Genuine Priest
 - 2)) (:47) Urgent Need to Make Atonement for the People
 - 3)) (:48) Arresting the Plague
 - 4)) (:49) Death Toll
 - 5)) (:50) Completion of the Priestly Intervention
- c. (17:1-13) The Sign of Aaron's Budding Rod – God Validates His Appointed Spiritual Leader to Shut the Mouths of Disputers
 - 1) (:1-7) Choice for Leadership Made Evident Via Divine Test
 - a) (:1-5) Explanation of the Divine Test
 - 1)) (:2a) Collect a Rod from Each Tribe
 - 2)) (:2b-3) Identify Each Rod
 - 3)) (:4) Deposit the Rods in the Presence of the Lord
 - 4)) (:5a) Proof of God's Choice of Aaron
 - 5)) (:5b) Purpose for God Validating Aaron's Leadership
 - b) (:6-7) Execution of the Divine Test
 - 1)) (:6) Collecting the Rods from Each Tribe
 - 2)) (:7) Depositing the Rods Before the Lord
 - 2) (:8-11) Confirmation of Leadership of Aaron Produces Miraculous Sign that is Saved as a Testimony
 - a) (:8) Sign of Miraculous Growth on Aaron's Rod
 - 1)) Miraculous Timing
 - 2)) Miraculous Growth
 - b) (:9) Sign of God's Choice of Aaron Contrasted with Usurpers
 - c) (:10-11) Sign of Testimony to Shut Up the Disputers
 - 3) (:12-13) Conviction of Insubordination Stirs Up Exaggerated Fear of Extermination
 - a) (:12) Hysterical Cries of Self Pity
 - b) (:13a) Overreaction to God's Discipline
 - c) (:13b) Despair of Life Itself
- 5. (18:1-32) Distinctive Role and Support of the Priests and Levites – Spiritual Leaders Bear Heavy Responsibilities But Find the Lord to Be Their Portion (Over and Above Generous Compensation for Their Service)
 - a. (:1-7) Distinction between Role of Priests and Levites
 - 1) (:1) Summary of the Liability Vested in the Levites and Aaronic

Priests

- a) Levites (Kohathites) Liable for Sanctuary Violations
- b) Aaronic Priests Liable for Priesthood Violations
- 2) (:2-6) Details of the Distinctive Role of the Levites vs. the Aaronic Priests
 - a) (:2-4) Duties of the Levites
 - b) (:5-6) Contrast Between the Role of the Aaronic Priests and the Levites
- 3) (:7) Summary of the Priority Role of the Aaronic Priests
 - a) Perform Your Priestly Responsibilities
 - b) Appreciate the Privilege of Priestly Service
 - c) Guard against Any Non-Aaronic Usurpers
- b. (:8-19) Support of the Aaronic Priests Via Various Offerings
 - 1) (:8) Summary Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests
 - 2) (:9-18) Details Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests
 - a) (:9-10) Portions of the Regular Sacrifices
 - b) (:11-13) Portions of the Wave Offerings and First Fruit Offerings
 - c) (:14) Devoted Things
 - d) (:15-18) Firstborn Offerings
 - 3) (:19) Summary Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests
- c. (:20) Unique Portion for the Priesthood = Heart of the passage
 - 1) Stated Negatively – Not Tied to Land Ownership
 - 2) Stated Positively – Tied to Special Relationship with the Lord
- d. (:21-24) Support of the Levites Via Tithes
 - 1) (:21) Purpose of the Tithe = to Support the Levites for Their Service
 - 2) (:22-23a) Privilege and Liability of Service Belongs Exclusively to the Levites
 - a) (:22) Warning Against Usurpers
 - b) (:23a) Focus on the Levites – Privilege and Liability Belong to Them
 - 3) (:23b-24) Perpetual Practice
 - a) (:23b) No Land Inheritance
 - b) (:24a) Reliance Upon Tithes
 - c) (:24b) No Land Inheritance
- e. (:25-32) Support of the Levites Includes Their Responsibility of Tithing to the Lord
 - 1) (:26-29) Responsibility of the Levites to Tithe
 - a) (:26) Give a Tithe of the Tithe
 - b) (:27) Give and It Will Be Reckoned as the Fruits of Your Own Labor
 - c) (:28) Give to the Priest ... to the Lord
 - d) (:29) Give the Best of the Best

- 2) (:30-32) Right of the Levites to Partake of the Remainder of the Offering
 - a) (:30) Belongs to You as If You Had Labored for It
 - b) (:31) Belongs to You as Compensation for Your Levitical Service
 - c) (:32) Belongs to You Without Sin or Guilt
6. (19:1-22) Laws on Cleansing – Cleansing from Contamination Caused by Contact with Death Maintains Close Contact with a Holy God
- a. (:1-10) Preparation for Purification – Procedure for Making the Cleansing Waters from the Ashes of the Slaughtered Red Cow
 - 1) (:2-6) Preparation for Purification Via Sacrifice of a Red Cow
 - a) (:2-3) Slaughter of the Red Heifer
 - b) (:4) Sprinkling of the Blood of the Red Heifer
 - c) (:5-6) Sizzling (Burning) of the Red Heifer
 - 2) (:7-8) Preparation for Purification Via Cleansing of Participants
 - a) (:7) Cleansing of the Priest
 - b) (:8) Cleansing of the One Burning the Red Cow
 - 3) (:9-10a) Preparation for Purification Via Procedure Regarding the Ashes for the Cleansing Waters
 - a) (:9a) Procedure for Gathering and Saving the Ashes
 - b) (:9b) Procedure for Preparing the Cleansing Waters
 - c) (:10a) Procedure for Cleansing the One Gathering the Ashes
 - 4) (:10b) Preparation for Purification Applies Universally and for All Time
 - b. (:11-13) Principles (General Rules) for Purification
 - 1) (:11) Reason for Defilement = Touching Dead Corpse – Defiling Power of Death
 - 2) (:12) Remedy for Defilement = Cleansing with Water of Purification
 - 3) (:13) Retribution for Defilement Where There is No Purification
 - a) Penalty: Cut Off from Israel
 - b) Pronouncement: He Remains Unclean
 - c. (:14-21a) Process of Applying Purification
 - 1) (:14-16) Case Law -- Two Contrasting Situations
 - a) (:14-15) Interior -- Case of Death in a Tent
 - b) (:16) Exterior -- Case of Death in the Open Field
 - 2) (:17-19) 3 Stages in the Process for Applying the Cleansing Waters of Purification
 - a) (:17) Creating the Purification Mixture
 - b) (:18) Cleansing the Unclean Person(s)
 - c) (:19) Cleansing the One Performing the Ritual
 - 3) (:20) Penalty for Not Using the Cleansing Waters of Purification
 - a) Death Penalty
 - b) Declared Permanently Unclean

- 4) (:21a) Perpetual Application of the Ordinance
- (:21b-22) Appendix – Dealing with Secondhand Uncleanness
 - 1) (:21b) Cleansing People
 - 2) (:22a) Cleansing Objects
 - 3) (:22b) Cleansing People
- 7. (20:1-29) Passing Away of Failed First Generation Leaders –
The Leadership Transition for the New Generation that Will Enter the Promised Land
(Despite Their Continuing Contending and Complaining) Requires the Death of Its Failed
Leaders
 - (:1) Prologue – Death of Miriam Marks the Beginning of Leadership
Transition
 - a. (:2-13) Spiritual Failure of Moses – Grumbling and Glory-Grabbing at the
Waters of Meribah
 - 1) (:2-5) Grumbling by the People in Questioning the Goodness and
Faithfulness of God’s Provision
 - a) (:2) Antagonism of Deprivation
 - b) (:3-5) Arguments of Contention
 - 2) (:6-11) Glory-Grabbing by Moses Out of Frustration for Persistent
Contention
 - a) (:6a) Another Face Plant
 - b) (:6b) Another Appearance of the Glory of God
 - c) (:7-8) Detailed Instructions on How to Obtain Water
 - d) (:9-11) Faulty Execution of the Lord’s Instructions
 - 3) (:12-13) Judgment by the Lord to Exalt His Holiness
 - a) (:12) Severe Curse of Falling Short of Entering the
Promised Land
 - b) (:13) Sad Commentary
 - b. (:14-22) Diplomatic Failure of Moses – Edom Refuses Passage
 - 1) (:14-17) Diplomatic Entreaty by Moses
 - a) (:14-15) Record of Historical Hardship
 - b) (:16a) Recognition of Divine Deliverance
 - c) (:16b-17) Request for Uncontested Passage
 - 2) (:18-20) Rejection by Edom
 - a) (:18) Initial Rejection Backed by Threat of the Sword
 - b) (:19) Second Appeal Sweetened with Assurance of
Payment
 - c) (:20) Final Rejection Backed by Show of Force
 - 3) (:21-22) Rerouting of the Journey
 - a) (:21) Acceptance of Rejection
 - b) (:22) Arrival at Mount Hor
 - (:23-29) Epilogue – Death of Aaron Marks the Transition from the Generation
of Death to the Generation of Promise
 - 1) (:24) Pronouncement of Judgment on Aaron
 - 2) (:25-28) Transition in Leadership from Aaron to Eleazar
 - a) (:25-26) Preparation for the Death of Aaron

- b) (:27-28) Passing of Moses /Transfer of Authority to Eleazar
- 3) (:29) Mourning of the People

B. (21:1 – 25:18) CRANKING UP OF SECOND GENERATION

1. (21:1-35) Initial Victories

a. (21:1-20) Celebrating Salvation – Despite Ongoing Grumbling and Complaining, the Lord’s People Experience His Gracious Salvation

1) (:1-3) Salvation from Enemies in Place of Previous Defeat – Promise to Destroy the Canaanites at Hormah

- a) (:1) Capture of Some Israelites
 - 1)) Identification of the Enemy
 - 2)) Intelligence Gleaned by the Enemy
 - 3)) Initiative by the Enemy to Capture Some Israelites

b) (:2) Commitment to Destroy the Enemy

c) (:3) Conclusion of the Matter

- 1)) Deliverance by the Lord
- 2)) Destruction by the Israelites

2) (:4-9) Salvation from the Judgment of Death – Picture of Salvation = Fiery Serpent on a Standard

a) (:4) Frustration of the People Builds

- 1)) Difficult Journey
- 2)) Difficult People

b) (:5) Familiar Complaint Lodged

- 1)) Resentment of the Lord’s Wisdom and Guidance
- 2)) Fear of the Worst Possible Outcome
- 3)) Magnifying Challenges
- 4)) Ingratitude

c) (:6) Fiery Serpents Dispatched for Judgment

d) (:7) Facing Their Sins – Repentance and Intercession

- 1)) Repentance by the People
- 2)) Intercession by Moses

e) (:8-9) Fiery Serpent Displayed for Salvation

- 1)) (:8) Provision for Salvation
- 2)) (:9) Appropriation of Salvation

3) (:10-20) Salvation from Deprivation in the Wilderness – Progression in Their Journeys to Position the Nation for Entering the Promised Land

a) (:10-15) Series of Locations for Camping

b) (:16-18a) Significance of Well at Beer

- 1)) (:16) Provision of Water by the Lord
- 2)) (:17-18a) Praise to the Lord via Commemorative Song

c) (:18b-20) Series of Progressive Destinations

b. (21:21-35) Celebrating Impressive Military Triumphs – Preparation to

Conquest the Land – God Grants Victories Over Powerful Foes When We Follow His Game Plan and Don’t Shrink Back in Fear from the Challenge

- 1) (:21-32) Triumph Over the Amorites (Including King Sihon)
 - a) (:21-22) Attempt at Diplomacy
 - 1)) Request for Passage Directed to Sihon, King of the Amorites
 - 2)) Three Resolutions Proving Israel was No Economic or Military Threat
 - b) (:23) Attack Led by Sihon
 - 1)) Diplomacy Rejected
 - 2)) Deployment of Troops in Battle
 - 3)) Deadly Combat Instigated
 - c) (:24-26) Appropriation of Captured Cities
 - 1)) (:24) Widespread Military Victories
 - 2)) (:25) Widespread Inhabitation of Amorite Cities
 - 3)) (:26) Well-known Significance of Heshbon
 - d) (:27-30) Assimilation of Taunt Song to Boast about Israelite Victory
 - 1)) (:27) Commitment to Build Heshbon as City of Sihon, King of Amorites
 - 2)) (:28) Fiery Judgment from Heshbon Against Moabite Cities
 - 3)) (:29) Proclamation of Woes as Moabites Taken Captive by Amorites
 - 4)) (:30) Ruin of Heshbon by Israelites
 - e) (:31-32) Amorites Further Defeated
 - 1)) (:31) Domination by Israel
 - 2)) (:32) Dispossession of the Amorites
 - 2) (:33-35) Triumph Over Bashan (Including King Og)
 - a) (:33) Battle against Og at Edrei in Bashan
 - b) (:34) Assurance of Victory from the Lord
 - c) (:35) Victory Over Og and His People
2. (22:1 – 24:25) Treachery of Balaam
- a. (22:1-41) Balaam Solicited by Balak to Curse Israel
 - 1) (22:1-21) Impure Motives Lead to Compromising Situations
 - (:1) Prologue – Transition – Israel in Position
 - a) (:2-6) King Balak of Moab Solicits Help from Balaam (in Concert with Midian) – Impure Motives Make Us Good Candidates for Compromising Proposals
 - 1)) (:2-3) Terrified by the Threat of Israel -- Sensing a Slaughter
 - a)) (:2) Terrified Because of the Slaughter of the Amorites
 - b)) (:3) Terrified Because of the Large Numbers of Israelites
 - 2)) (:4) Aligning with Adjacent Midian

- 3)) (:5-6) Calling for a Curse
 - a)) (:5a) Dispatching Delegation to Seek Assistance
 - b)) (:5b-6) Making the Case for Cursing Israel
- b) (:7-14) Pagan Prophet Balaam Forbidden by the Lord to Go and Curse Israel – Impure Motives Rebuked by Divine Revelation
 - 1)) (:7-8) Initial Interaction
 - a)) (:7) Delegation Makes Their Pitch
 - b)) (:8) Divine Guidance Sought by Balaam
 - 2)) (:9-12) Resounding Rejection
 - a)) (:9) Examining the Source
 - b)) (:10-11) Explaining the Situation
 - c)) (:12) Excluding the Options
 - 3)) (:13-14) Communicating the Counsel of the Lord
 - a)) (:13) Balaam Communicates to the Delegation
 - b)) (:14) Delegation Communicates to Balak
- c) (:15-20) Balaam Solicited Again with a Blank Check – Impure Motives Always Open to New Possibilities
 - 1)) (:15-17) Improving the Offer
 - a)) (:15) Better Delegation
 - b)) (:16) Better Overcoming of Obstacles
 - c)) (:17) Better Compensation
 - d)) (:17b) Same Solicitation to Curse Israel
 - 2)) (:18) Professing Unwavering Loyalty to the Word of God
 - 3)) (:19-20) Opening the Door to a Possible Change of Plans
 - a)) (:19) Revisiting Divine Guidance
 - b)) (:20) Revised Divine Instructions
- (:21) Epilogue – Balaam Goes to Balak
- 2) (22:22-41) Perception and Protection from Balaam’s Dumb Donkey
 - (:22) Prologue – Balaam Blindly Following Impure Motives
 - Impure Motives Anger God
 - Impure Motives Cause God to Stand against You
 - Impure Motives Have an Unimpressive Supporting Cast
 - a) (:23-27) Opening the Eyes of the Donkey – Donkey Sees the Danger
 - 1)) (:23) Drawn Sword – Alternate Path – Donkey Goes Into the Field – First Strike
 - 2)) (:24-25) Restraining Wall – Avoidance – Donkey Rubs Against the Wall – Second Strike
 - 3)) (:26-27) Narrow Space – Acquiescence –

Donkey Lies Down -- Third Strike

- b) (:28-30) Opening the Mouth of the Donkey – Donkey Rebukes Balaam
 - 1) (:28) Donkey Protests the Undeserved Beating
 - 2) (:29) Balaam Responds in Blind Arrogance – Unaware of the Danger
 - 3) (:30) Donkey Reasons on the Basis of His Faithful Service
- c) (:31-35) Opening the Eyes of Balaam – Lord Rebukes Balaam
 - 1) (:31) AHA Moment for Balaam
 - a) Balaam Now Sees the Danger
 - b) Response of Humiliation and Fear
 - 2) (:32-33) Argumentation Supporting Rebuke by the Angel of the Lord
 - a) (:32a) Irrationality of Undeserved Beating
 - b) (:32b) Imminent Danger Due to Rebellion
 - c) (:33) Intervention by the Donkey Saved Balaam’s Life
 - 3) (:34) Apology that Lacks Conviction
 - a) Pleading Ignorance of the Lord’s Opposition
 - b) Protesting that He does not Wish to Displease the Lord
 - 4) (:35) Acquiescence with Restriction
- d) (:36-41) Leading Balaam to the Point of Temptation – Balak Prepares to Seek a Curse on Israel from Balaam
 - 1) (:36) Rendezvous of Impatience on the Part of Balak
 - 2) (:37) Reproach for Hesitancy on the Part of Balaam
 - 3) (:38) Reminder of Constraints on the Prophecy on the Part of Balaam
 - 4) (:39-41) Recording of the Preparations for Prophesying
 - a) (:39) Impressive Site
 - b) (:40) Impressive Sacrifice
 - c) (:41) Impressive Staging
- b. (23:1 – 24:25) Balaam’s Oracles – Enemy Opposition Cannot Undermine God’s Promised Blessing on His Chosen, Conquering People
 - 1) (:1-12) Balaam’s First Oracle – Israel as a Chosen People Blessed by a Sovereign King
 - a) (:1-4) Preparation for the Oracle
 - 1) (:1-2) Preparation Involving Sacrifices
 - 2) (:3-4) Preparation Involving Soliciting God’s

Revelation

- b) (:5-10) Delivery of the Oracle – the Seed Promise
 - 1)) (:5-6) Prophetic Charge
 - 2)) (:7-10) Prophetic Content
- c) (:11-12) Response to the Oracle
 - 1)) (:11) Response of Balak
 - 2)) (:12) Response of Balaam
- 2) (:13-26) Balaam’s Second Oracle – Israel as a Conquering People Blessed by a Victorious King
 - a) (:13-15) Preparation for the Oracle
 - 1)) (:13) Preparation Redirected to a Second Location
 - 2)) (:14) Preparation Involving Sacrifices
 - 3)) (:15) Preparation Involving Soliciting God’s Revelation
 - b) (:16-24) Delivery of the Oracle – the Land Promise
 - 1)) (:16-17) Prophetic Charge
 - 2)) (:18-24) Prophetic Content
 - c) (:25-26) Response to the Oracle
 - 1)) (:25) Response of Balak
 - 2)) (:26) Response of Balaam
- 3) (23:27 – 24:14) Balaam’s Third Oracle – Israel as a Covenant People Blessed by an Exalted King
 - a) (23:27-30) Preparation for the Oracle
 - 1)) (:27-28) Preparation Redirected to a Third Location
 - 2)) (:29-30) Preparation Involving Sacrifices
 - b) (24:1-24) Delivery of the Oracle – the Blessing Promise
 - 1)) (:1-4) Prophetic Charge – Vision from the Spirit of God
 - 2)) (:5-9a) Prophetic Content
 - c) (24:10-14) Response to the Oracle
 - 1)) (:10-11) Response of Balak
 - 2)) (:12-14) Response of Balaam
- 4) (24:15-19) Balaam’s Fourth Oracle – Messianic Dominion
 - a) (:15-16) Prophetic Charge
 - b) (:17-19) Prophetic Content
 - 1)) (:17) Coming Deliverer
 - 2)) (:18-19) Coming Dominion
- 5) (24:20-24) Balaam’s Final 3 Oracles – Destruction of Neighboring Nations
 - a) (:20) Oracle Regarding Amalek
 - b) (:21-22) Oracle Regarding Kenites
 - c) (:23-24) Oracle Regarding Asshur and Eber
- (24:25) Epilogue – Parting of Balaam and Balak
- 3. (25:1-18) Spiritual Harlotry, Divine Judgment and Priestly Intervention –

The Destruction from Spiritual Harlotry Can Only be Mitigated by the Atoning Zeal of a Faithful High Priest

- a. (:1-5) God's Reaction to Extreme Corporate Spiritual Harlotry – Idolatry and Immorality Undermine Loyalty to the Covenant Relationship and Will be Severely Punished
 - 1) (:1-2) Divine Loyalty Abused – Committing Spiritual Harlotry
 - a) (:1) Sexual Harlotry with Moabite Women
 - b) (:2) Participation in Idolatrous Worship of Moabite Gods
 - 2) (:3) Divine Anger Manifested
 - a) Cause for Divine Anger
 - b) Reaction of Divine Anger
 - 3) (:4-5) Divine Judgment Commanded
 - a) (:4) Execution Orders from the Lord
 - b) (:5) Execution Orders from Moses
- b. (:6-9) Phinehas' Reaction to Specific High Profile Instance of Blatant Spiritual Harlotry – Egregious Violations of the Covenant Relationship Must be Dealt with Decisively in Order to Mitigate the Damage
 - 1) (:6) Reality of Blatant Spiritual Harlotry
 - 2) (:7-8a) Response of Atoning Anger
 - a) (:7) Rapid Response
 - b) (:8a) Atoning Attack
 - 3) (:8b) Result of Executing the Offenders
 - a) Termination of Divine Judgment
 - b) Tally of the Dead
- c. (:10-13) Phinehas' Reward for His Zeal and Faithfulness – Those Who are Jealous for God's Honor Earn a Perpetual Reward for Their Zeal and Faithfulness
 - 1) (:10-11) Righteous Jealousy
 - 2) (:12-13) Reward of Covenant of Peace
 - a) Nature of the Reward
 - b) Duration of the Reward
 - c) Reason for the Reward
- d. (:14-15) Shameful Legacy for the Two High Profile Offenders – High Profile Spiritual Traitors Earn a Perpetual Legacy of Shame
 - 1) (:14) Slain Israelite Man = Zimri
 - 2) (:15) Slain Midianite Woman = Cozbi
- e. (:16-18) Call for Retaliation Against the Midianites – The Enemies of God's People Must Suffer the Retribution
 - 1) (:16-17) Command to Retaliate
 - 2) (:18) Charge of Hostility and Deception

III. (26:1 – 36:13) SECOND GENERATION OF GOD'S TROOPS MOBILIZED FOR CONQUEST – FAITHFULNESS OF GOD TO RELAUNCH THE MISSION – FOCUSING ON RENEWED FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

LOCATION = PLAINS OF MOAB
DURATION = ABOUT 5 MONTHS

A. (26:1–32:42) The Preparations for the Conquest and Possession of the Land

1. (26:1-65) Census of the New Generation
2. (27:1-23) Transfers to the Younger Generation
 - a. (27:1-11) Transfer of Inheritance from Zelophehad to His Daughters
 - b. (27:12-14) Preparation for Departure of Moses
 - c. (27:15-23) Transfer of Leadership from Moses to Joshua
Leadership Transitions Must be Based in Divine Selection, Must Function According to the Power and Authority of the Spirit, and Must Issue in Pastoral Guidance and Care
 - 1) (:15-17) Need for a Qualified Shepherd to Replace Moses and Lead God's Flock
 - a) (:16) Qualified from an Overall Standpoint -- God's People Need Divinely Appointed Human Leadership
 - b) (:17a) Qualified from a Military Standpoint -- God's Leader Must Lead and God's People Must Follow
 - c) (:17b) Qualified from a Pastoral Standpoint -- God's Flock Needs Godly Shepherding
 - 2) (:18-23) Provision of Joshua to Succeed Moses with Full Authority
 - a) (:18-21) Divine Appointment of Joshua
 - 1)) (:18a) Identifying Joshua to Succeed Moses
 - 2)) (:18b-19) Commissioning Joshua – Specific Instructions for Moses
 - 3)) (:20) Empowering Joshua
 - 4)) (:21) Supporting Joshua
 - b) (:22-23) Human Commissioning of Joshua by Moses
 - 1)) (:22b) Public Presentation of Joshua
 - 2)) (:23) Personal Commissioning by Moses
3. (28:1 – 29:40) Regulations for Offerings
 - a. (28:1-2) Introduction
 - b. (28:3-8) Daily Offerings
 - c. (28:9-10) Weekly (Sabbath) Offerings
 - d. (28:11-15) Monthly (Rosh Chodesh) Offerings
 - e. (28:16-256) Passover (Pesach) and Unleavened Bread Offerings
 - f. (28:26-31) Feast of Weeks (Shavuoth / Pentecost) Offerings
 - g. (29:1-6) Feast of the Blowing Trumpets Offerings
 - h. (29:7-11) Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) Offerings
 - i. (29:16-38) Feast of Booths (Sukkoth) Offerings
 - j. (29:39-40) Summary
4. (30:1-16) Regulations for Women's Vows
 - a. (30:1-2) Introduction: General Principle for Vows
 - b. (30:3-5) Vows of Unmarried Women
 - c. (30:6-8) Vows of Newly Married Women
 - d. (30:9) Vows of Widowed or Divorced Women

- e. (30:10-15) Vows of Married Women
 - f. (30:16) Summary
5. (31:1 – 32:42) Settlement Instructions for Trans-Jordan Territory
- a. (31:1-54) The Lord’s Full Vengeance on Midian –
The Severity of God’s Vengeance Exposes the Fallacy of Attacking Those
Who are Under His Providential Protection and Promised Blessing
 - 1) (:1-12) Conducting the Battle –
God’s Power and Sovereignty
 - a) (:2) Mandating the Final Mission for Moses
 - b) (:3-6) Mobilizing the Troops to Attack Midian
 - 1)) (:3) Explaining the Need for Troops to Attack Midian
 - 2)) (:4-5) Enlisting the Troops for War
 - 3)) (:6) Engaging the Troops with Holy Support
 - c) (:7-8) Making War Victoriously Against Midian
 - 1)) (:7) Killing all the Males – the Warriors
 - 2)) (:8a) Killing the Five Kings of Midian – the Leaders
 - 3)) (:8b) Killing Balaam – the Instigator
 - d) (:9-12) Mopping Up Activities of Capturing, Burning, Plundering and Possessing
 - 1)) (:9) Capturing
 - 2)) (:10) Burning
 - 3)) (:11) Plundering
 - 4)) (:12) Possessing
 - 2) (:13-18) Inflicting the Ban –
God’s Justice and Righteousness
 - a) (:13) Battle Assessment
 - b) (:14) Blaming Anger
 - c) (:15-16) Botched Assignment
 - 1)) (:15) Key Failure
 - 2)) (:16) Key Justification for Their Eradication
 - d) (:17-18) Brutal Adjustment
 - 1)) (:17) Kill All Young Males and Sexually Active Women
 - 2)) (:18) Spare Only Female Virgins
 - 3) (:19-24) Purifying the People and the Possessions –
God’s Holiness
 - a) (:19-20) Purifying Instructions Given by Moses
 - 1)) (:19) Purifying the People
 - 2)) (:20) Purifying the Possessions
 - b) (:21-24) Purifying Instructions Given by Eleazar the Priest
 - 1)) (:22-23) Purifying the Possessions by Fire and Water
 - 2)) (:24) Purifying the People
 - 4) (:25-47) Dividing Up the Spoil –

God's Blessing of Abundance and Providential Care

- a) (:25-31) Summary
 - 1)) (:26) Count the Total Spoil
 - 2)) (:27) Divide Between the Warriors and the Non-Warriors
 - 3)) (:28-29) Tax the Warriors and Give to Eleazar
 - 4)) (:30) Tax the Non-Warriors and Give to the Levites
 - 5)) (:31) Compliance with the Instructions
- b) (:32-35) Tally of the Total Spoil
 - 1)) (:32) Sheep
 - 2)) (:33) Cattle
 - 3)) (:34) Donkeys
 - 4)) (:35) Virgin Women
- c) (:36-41) Tally of Half the Spoil for the Warriors
 - 1)) (:36-37) Sheep
 - 2)) (:38) Cattle
 - 3)) (:39) Donkeys
 - 4)) (:40) Virgin Women
 - 5)) (:41) Lord's Portion Given to Eleazar the Priest
- d) (:42-47) Tally of Half the Spoil for the Non-Warriors
 - 1)) (:42-43) Sheep
 - 2)) (:44) Cattle
 - 3)) (:45) Donkeys
 - 4)) (:46) Virgin Women
 - 5)) (:47) Lord's Portion Given to Levites
- 5) (:48-54) Offering of Gold to Yahweh –
God's Grace and Forgiveness – Expression of Thanksgiving
 - a) (:48-50) Giving the Offering
 - 1)) (:48) Initiation of the Offering by the Military Leaders
 - 2)) (:49) Motivation for the Offering = Providential Protection during Battle
 - 3)) (:50) Presentation of the Offering
 - b) (:51-52) Receiving the Offering
 - 1)) (:51) Recipients = Moses and Eleazar
 - 2)) (:52) Total Amount = 16,750 Shekels of Gold
 - c) (:53) Seizing the Offering
 - d) (:54) Commemorating the Offering
- b. (32:1-42) Trans-Jordan Tribes: Reuben and Gad –
Compromise with God's Revealed Agenda (Land Promise) Leads to a Quagmire of Complexity
 - 1) (:1-5) Compromising Request to Possess the Land East of the Jordan – Desire for Instant Gratification or Justifiable Improved Plan?
 - a) (:1a) The Situation = We need grazing land for livestock
 - b) (:1b) The Opportunity = This land meets that need

- c) (:2-5) The Petition = Please give us this land and grant us an exemption from crossing over the Jordan
 - 1)) (:2) Addressing the Leaders
 - 2)) (:3-4) Arguing Their Case
 - 3)) (:5) Appealing for a Favorable Decision
- 2) (:6-15) Uncompromising Denial Based on Emotion and Reason – Immediate Gut Sense that This Request was Outside the Scope of God’s Plan
 - a) (:6-7) Denial Based on Two Fundamental Objections – Visceral Response
 - 1)) (:6b) Compromises the Solidarity of the Mission
 - 2)) (:7) Compromises the Commitment Needed to Pursue the Promise of the Lord
 - b) (:8-13) Denial Based on the Historical Example of Previous Failure and Judgment – Reasoned Response
 - 1)) (:8) Experience of Moses in Sending the Spies
 - 2)) (:9) Failure of the Spies in Undermining Faith in the Lord’s Promise
 - 3)) (:10-13) Judgment of the Lord
 - c) (:14-15) Denial Based on Assumption of Evil Motives and Expectation of Destructive Outcome
 - 1)) (:14) Assumption of Evil Motives
 - 2)) (:15) Expectation of Destructive Outcome
- 3) (:16-27) Compromising Negotiations Based on Creative and Reasonable Proposal – But What About the Revealed Will of God?
 - a) (:16-19) Revised Proposal by the Two Tribes
 - 1)) (:16) Commitment to Dwell in Trans-Jordan Territory
 - 2)) (:17) Commitment to Lead the Canaan Conquest Campaign
 - 3)) (:18) Commitment to Solidarity with Inheritance Hopes of Fellow Israelites
 - 4)) (:19) Commitment to Restrict Inheritance to Trans-Jordan Territory
 - b) (:20-24) Release from Long Term Canaan Obligations Issued by Moses
 - 1)) (:20-23) Carry Out Your Obligations to Israel
 - 2)) (:24) Carry Out Your Plans to Possess the Trans-Jordan Territory
 - c) (:25-27) Response of Commitment by Two Tribes
 - 1)) (:25) Summary Commitment
 - 2)) (:26) Commitment to Occupy Trans-Jordan Territory
 - 3)) (:27) Commitment to Participate in Canaan Conquest Campaign
- 4) (:28-32) Compromising Acceptance with Agreed Upon Conditions

Communicated to the Other Leaders of Israel

- a) (:28-30) Spelling Out the Terms of the Compromise Agreement
 - 1)) (:28) Summary of the Agreement
 - 2)) (:29) Conditions Meriting Possession of Trans-Jordan Territory
 - 3)) (:30) Conditions Defaulting to Possession of Canaanite Territory
- b) (:31-32) Stipulating to Obey the Terms of the Compromising Agreement
 - 1)) (:31) Viewed as Obedience to the Lord
 - 2)) (:32) Viewed as Acted Out in the Presence of the Lord
- 5) (:33-42) Compromising Possession of the Land East of the Jordan
 - a) (:33) Summary of Possession Granted to Tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh
 - b) (:34-38) Possession Granted to Sons of Gad and Sons of Reuben
 - 1)) (:34-36) Sons of Gad
 - 2)) (:37-38) Sons of Reuben
 - c) (:39-42) Possession Granted to Sons of Manasseh
 - 1)) (:39-40) Sons of Machir
 - 2)) (:41) Jair
 - 3)) (:42) Nobah

B. (33:1–49) The Review of the Journey in the Wilderness

C. (33:50–36:13) The Anticipation of the Conquest and Possession of the Land

1. (33:50-56) Final Marching Orders for Conquering and Possessing Canaan – Occupying Holy Land Requires Extreme Extermination of Threats to Covenant Worship
 - (:50) Prologue – Final Command to Conquer and Distribute the Promised Land Introduced
 - Divine Mandate
 - Geographic Setting
 - Verbal Instructions
 - a. (:51-53) Radical Commission to Utterly Conquer and Possess Canaan
 - 1) (:51) Engagement of the Military Campaign to Possess Canaan
 - 2) (:52) Elimination of Threats to Covenant Worship
 - a) Drive Out the Inhabitants so they are No Longer a Threat
 - b) Destroy Their Idols so they are No Longer a Temptation
 - c) Demolish Their Worship Shrines so they are No Longer a Distraction
 - 3) (:53) Emancipation of the Land for Permanent Possession as Promised

- a) Possession of the Land by Force
 - b) Promise of the Land Gift Fulfilled
 - b. (:54) Renewed Commitment to Grant the Land as a Distributed Inheritance
 - 1) Distribution Sovereignly Controlled by the Lord
 - 2) Distribution Based on Size of the Tribe
 - a) To the Larger
 - b) To the Smaller
 - 3) Distribution Irrevocable
 - 4) Distribution Tied to Tribal Identity
 - c. (:55-56) Reversing Caveat = Obey or Suffer a Similar Fate
 - 1) (:55a) Failure Will Have Consequences
 - 2) (:55b-56) Consequences Will Be Severe
 - a) (:55b) Recurring Opposition
 - b) (:56) Reversing of Fortunes
- 2. (34:1-15) Borders of the Promised Land
- 3. (34:16-29) Appointed Officials
- 4. (35:1-34) Levitical Holdings in the Promised Land
- 5. (36:1-13) Inheritance of Zelophehad's Daughters

TEXT: Numbers 6:22-27

TITLE: AARONIC BENEDICTION

BIG IDEA:

THE BLESSED PRESENCE OF GOD’S PROTECTION, FAVOR AND PEACE MEET ALL OF THE NEEDS OF THE BELIEVING COMMUNITY

INTRODUCTION:

Here is the classic OT benediction passage. I can remember as a child my pastor frequently closing sermons with this text. It has such a melodic flow to the language. It is succinct and yet profound in its theology and practical application. I have a special affection for these verses. What a comfort to bask in the great blessings which we enjoy from our gracious God. These blessings are all-encompassing and sufficient for the magnitude and variety of both personal and corporate needs in the believing community. The Apostle Paul sums up the same sentiments in his characteristic closing benediction of “*Grace and Peace.*”

Timothy Ashley: Aaron’s blessing (vv. 24–26) is surrounded by a framework that identifies the divine author of the directive and the human mediator of it (v. 22), states the priestly duty to pronounce blessing on the people (v. 23), and tells the outcome of such a blessing (v. 27). The blessing itself is a prayer that God would grant his gracious presence and watchcare to his people. This is expressed in three poetic lines of unequal, increasing length. In the liturgical tradition of Israel (and of the Church) the blessing (or benediction) concludes the service of worship and serves as a promise of God’s blessing on the worshipers as they go into the world. An example of a concluding benediction is **Lev. 9:22**, which climaxes the worship service that culminates the whole revelation of the tabernacle, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood (**Exod. 25–Lev. 9**). . .

Blessings in the OT vary widely in their construction and contents. One should distinguish between the blessing, which calls for future goodness, and the beatitude, which looks to the blessings that presently exist (**Ps. 1:1–2**); one should also distinguish between the blessing in which God is the giver of the good gifts and the praise speech in which he is the receiver of praise for those good gifts.

Gordon Keddie: It is no accident that this blessing is recorded in the Word next to the Nazirite law. Holiness and blessing are inseparable. Indeed the blessing of God precedes our desire to do his will, undergirds our present obedience and rewards and reinforces us for future discipleship.

Thomas Constable: This blessing was three-fold, and each segment contained two parts. In each case the second part was a particular application of the general request stated in the first part. The first part hoped for God’s action that would result in the people’s

benefit in the second part. The three blessings were increasingly emphatic. Even the structure of the blessing in Hebrew is artful. Line one consists of 15 letters (3 words), line two of 20 letters (5 words), and line three of 25 letters (7 words). . .

The first blessing is the most general (**Numbers 6:24**). God's blessing is His goodness poured out. The priest called on Him not only to provide for His people but to defend them from all evil.

The second blessing is more specific (**Numbers 6:25**). God's face is the revelation of His personality to people. It radiates as fire does, consuming evil and bestowing light and warmth, and it shines as the sun, promoting life. God's graciousness refers to the manifestation of His favor and grace in the events of life.

The third blessing is the most specific (**Numbers 6:26**). Lifting up the countenance refers to manifesting power. The priest called on God to manifest His power for His people. Specifically this would produce peace (Heb. *shalom*). "*Shalom*" does not mean just the absence of aggravation. It is the sum of all God's blessings.

"The two main elements in the oracle are "grace and peace." It is probable that the Apostle Paul based his salutations on this oracle." [Note: The NET Bible note on 6:22.]

(:22-23) PROLOGUE – COMMAND TO BLESS ISRAEL

*"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
'Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying,
Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: "'*

I. (:24) GOD'S BLESSING AND PROTECTION

A. God's Summary Blessing

"The LORD bless you,"

Brueggemann: In the Old Testament, God's blessing comprised material bounty like those included in the positive side of covenant sanctions (**Deut 28:3–14**): wealth (**Gen 24:35**), posterity (**Gen 28:3; Deut 1:11**), land (**Gen 35:12; 48:3–4**), fertility, health, and victory (**Deut 7:12–16**), and strength and peace (**Ps 29:11**). The New Testament focuses the expectation of blessing on those who demonstrate an eschatological kingdom lifestyle (**Matt 5:3–12**), and that blessing rests first on the pious "*poor*" (**Luke 4:18; 6:20**).

J. Ligon Duncan: Before this blessing is given, the children of Israel are assembled, getting ready to leave on a dangerous journey across the desert. Many of them were going to die in the wilderness. They were going to be assaulted by enemies. They were going to face thirst and starvation. They were going to face division and dissention, and before they begin this arduous, dangerous, adventurous journey, God goes before them with a blessing, and nothing would have been more comforting to them

than the guarantee of God's sovereign blessing. That in and of itself plays into the whole story of Numbers, because over and over what will the people of God doubt in the wilderness? They will doubt God's purpose to bless them. Isn't it ironic? Before they ever set out, God says to them through Aaron 'Let Me just make one thing perfectly clear' — if you can remember President Nixon using that phrase: "Let me make this perfectly clear..." — now here's the Lord, who does not lie, saying 'Let me make one thing perfectly clear!' And He pronounces this blessing, and if they could have just believed that, how different the story of Numbers would have been. It would have been an entirely different book if they had believed what God said in this passage. But how kind of God to give them these kinds of assurances before they ever set out. . .

Five times in this tiny little passage God makes it amply clear that He and He alone is the one who is capable of blessing His people. He is the only source of the only blessing that is worth having. And my friends, I want to suggest to you, especially in light of the theme of grumbling and distrust in the book of Numbers, that if the children of Israel had understood just that one truth adequately, it would have totally changed the story of the book of Numbers. If they had simply understood this: God is the giver; He's the source of blessing; nothing that He doesn't give do we need; what He gives is all we need. If they had understood that one thing, the whole story of Numbers would be different.

B. God's Protection

"and keep you;"

Note that the emphasis is both corporate and personal

Timothy Ashley: The **keeping** or preserving power of God (basic to the root *šmr*) can be seen in widely separated contexts in the OT. God has the power to guard and preserve his faithful servants alive, no matter where their paths lead (see, e.g., **Gen. 28:15; Exod. 23:30; Josh. 24:17; Ps. 12:7**; most of the stories in **Dan. 1–6** have this as one of their themes). God can watch over his servants in battle (**1 Sam. 30:23**), and gives his watchcare for his own (e.g., **Ps. 91:11; 127:1**). God is also faithful to keep (*šmr*) his covenant with his people and his steadfast covenant loyalty and love (*hesed*) with them (**Deut. 7:12; Neh. 1:9; 9:32**; etc.), not because he must but because of his grace.

II. (:25) GOD'S FAVOR AND GRACE

A. God's Favor

"The LORD make His face shine on you,"

R. K. Harrison: The "face of God" is another way of speaking about His personality. . . if the Lord's presence is radiating divine favor in the midst of His people, they can confidently expect Him to pour out His covenant mercies upon them. . . **Miller** regards the shining countenance of God as a positive presence for help and favor and as a sign

of the friendly and beneficent nearness of God who is gracious in His assistance as He turns to help human beings.

B. God's Grace

“And be gracious to you;”

Timothy Ashley: “Grace” describes the attitude that issues in kindly action of a superior party to an inferior one in which the inferior has no claim on the superior. Graciousness is a fundamental aspect of Yahweh’s character, as both Old and New Testaments abundantly witness. Even though the placement of this passage emphasizes the keeping of various laws and rituals, the keeping of the law does not force God to be gracious. In fact, if the inferior party deserves the kindness, it would not be grace but payment. Yahweh is sovereign and he will show his grace when and to whom he wills (**Exod. 33:19**).

III. (:26) GOD’S PRESENCE AND PEACE

A. God’s Presence

“The LORD lift up His countenance on you,”

R. K. Harrison: by lifting up the face God is in fact looking directly at His people so that they may receive the benefit of His full attention. The result is *shalom*, which means peace, prosperity, completeness, health, safety, general well-being, and so on. Peace in the context of the Aaronic benediction does not mean the absence of war but rather the product of a spiritually mature, healthy, and integrated personality that serves God and man to the full. Most of the occurrences of the word describe the state of fulfillment that results from God’s presence.

B. God’s Peace

“And give you peace.”

Warren Wiersbe: Peace involves quietness of heart within us, spiritual health and spiritual prosperity, adequacy for the demands of life, and the kind of spiritual well-being that rises above circumstances. **George Morrison** defined “*peace*” as the “possession of adequate resources,” which is what Paul had in mind when he wrote **Philippians 4:6-20**.

(:27) EPILOGUE – PROMISE TO BLESS ISRAEL

“So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them.”

Roy Gane: In this structural pattern, the Lord’s putting his name on the Israelites (**v. 27a**) is the functional equivalent of giving them well-being (**v. 26b**). Implied is reinforcement of the idea that through their connection with God, whose name represents his Presence and character (cf. **Deut. 12:5, 11, 21; Ezek. 20:9, 14, 22**), his people receive well-being.

Dennis Cole: The pronouncement of the prayer by the priests will confer the Name of Yahweh upon the children of Israel. As **Allen** states, “The prayer is designed to help the people experience the reality of the blessing of the Lord whose delight is to bring that blessing near; his promise is that he will do just that very thing.” The Name Yahweh carries with it the covenantal promise of his divine presence with his people, even through the deserts of Sinai, Paran, and Zin, and into the Promised Land. In the land of his blessing, which Israel will inherit as his possession, the people will experience the fullness of his blessing of security, prosperity, wholeness, and well-being.

J. Ligon Duncan: The way that God is going to mark His people is with a blessing—not with a brand, not with a bond, but with a blessing. That’s going to be His mark of ownership. How do you know that these are My people? I’ve put My name and My blessing on them, that’s how you’re going to know that they’re My people.

And so this blessing shows us God as a bountiful giver, and a strong protector, and a faithful friend, and a forgiving Father, and a reliable partner, and a generous provider, and a unique owner.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What role should the benediction play in our traditional worship service?
- 2) Given this pronouncement of God’s blessing at the beginning of the book, how surprising is it that the covenant people continually question and complain against the goodness and providential provision of their God?
- 3) How parallel is this blessing to the types of blessings expressed by the NT authors? What are the common themes?
- 4) How does this passage reinforce the validity of scripted, liturgical prayers (vs. some who say that only spontaneous prayers are valid)?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Gordon Keddie: The blessing is a poem with three lines consisting respectively of three, five and seven Hebrew words. **Wenham** points out that if the three occurrences of “Lord” are subtracted, there are twelve words left, “no doubt symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The force of each blessing is plain. In the first, the declared blessing of God issues in his keeping us under his protection and care. In the second, the shining of his face indicates a benevolent intent and results in our experiencing his grace and favour in many ways. Finally, the turning, or lifting up, of his face towards us means that he is attentive to our needs and meets them with his peace. He cares for us, he surrounds us with his favour and he brings forth peace in our hearts. This is the unconditional promise of his free grace! The threefold nature of the blessing speaks of fullness and points, say **Keil and Delitzsch**, to “the threefold way in which it is communicated to us through the Father, Son, and Spirit.”

R. K. Harrison. This benediction, presented in the form of a wish for the future, is one of the most beautiful in the entire literature of spirituality. Happily, it is not restricted in its usage or efficacy to God’s ancient people or their modern offspring but brings great joy and peace to the Christian as well. Despite its disarming appearance, it is surprisingly intricate. It identifies the divine Author of all that is good as a Being who is able to bring prosperity and peace to His faithful people, in contrast to pagan deities, who were powerless in this respect. God used His servant Moses to mediate to Aaron the high priest and to his descendants the benediction that was to be the peculiar prerogative of the priesthood.

Peter Wallace: The same priests who offer the sacrifices are the ones who are to bless the people. Indeed, those are the two most important duties of the priests: offer sacrifices and bless. And those two duties are closely related. After all, it is precisely because of the sacrifices that they are able to bless the people! The offerings deal with sin and guilt – both for the sins of the people, and for the corruption – the contamination – the uncleanness of the people. And the blessing is crucial – because it’s not enough to have your sins forgiven! You need to be restored to life and fellowship – and the presence of God!

David Stubbs points out that there are numerous connections between this blessing and Moses’ encounter with God at Sinai. Moses encountered God “face-to-face” according to **Ex. 33:11, 20**. When God proclaimed his name to Moses, he declared himself to be “*gracious*” (**Ex 34:6**) and the result was that Moses’ face shone (**34:29**), and that God promised to give Israel “rest” (**33:14**).

David Thompson: In 1979, archeologist G. Barkai was doing work in the Hinnom Valley. He discovered a burial complex from the 7th to 6th century B.C.. Among the remains was a leather phylactery that contained two scrolls the size of a small cigarette. On both of them this benediction was written. The text is near identical to the Hebrew Masoretic text that has been translated into English. This shows the importance of this blessing.

Robert Rayburn: “*Benediction*” has come, through widespread ignorance uncorrected at seminary, to mean simply a pious form of words with which to end a worship service. The idea that God is actually extending his blessing to an expectant people, that goodness and help and care is actually being transferred from heaven to earth, that fact

that something is being *done* and that something is *happening* at the end of the service has been utterly lost to the church's mind because it has been lost to the minister's mind. Few ministers have studied the benediction and its place in the life of God's people and its place in Christian worship in large part because they were never trained to think about these things; but this neglect is also part of that general devaluation of worship that continues in our generation when the service becomes in almost everyone's mind, including the minister's, less and less an encounter between God and his people and more a meeting of the people of God for spiritual purposes.

TEXT: Numbers 9:15-23

TITLE: *FOLLOWING THE COMMAND OF THE LORD – THE CLOUD AND THE FIRE*

BIG IDEA:
GUIDANCE FOR THE DEPARTURE AND ENCAMPMENT OF THE ISRAELITE TROOPS WAS PROVIDED BY THE CLOUD AND THE FIRE SIGNIFYING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

INTRODUCTION:

Divine Guidance tests our patience and our dependency upon the Lord. As parents we are very familiar with the constant badgering of our kids with the age-old question: “Are we there yet?” We want to control our journey. We are uncomfortable with uncertain expectations regarding timing and destination. Imagine the difficulty of the Israelites in trying to consistently obey this unpredictable guidance provided by the Lord on their journey to the Promised Land. We need to look for lessons regarding how we discern the Lord’s guidance today and how we manage our expectations and commit to obedience in confidence of the Lord’s faithfulness in leading us.

David Allen: **Numbers 9:15-23** signals the conclusion of the time of Israel’s one-year encampment at Sinai and their embarkation on their journey through the wilderness to the promised land. During that year, between the first Passover in Egypt in **Exodus 12**, and the next Passover recorded in **Numbers 9:1**, God gave the people a series of new beginnings. He gave them the Law. He instituted the priesthood and sacrificial system. He gave them the tabernacle. He organized the twelve tribes; three tribes camping on each of the four sides of the newly constructed tabernacle.

The very presence of God Himself was evidenced by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. When the tabernacle was completed, this cloud of God’s glory and presence hovered over it. Here is God’s presence with and among His people . . . constantly (**verse 16**).

Whenever the cloud moved, the people moved. When the cloud stopped the people camped. “*At the command of the Lord they marched, and at the command of the Lord they camped.*” The people were totally dependent upon God for direction when to march and when to camp.

Once camped, there was a constant uncertainty of departure. While on the march, there was a constant uncertainty of duration. There was a constant uncertainty of destination as to where they would camp next.

Why was this? God was teaching His people **dependence on Him**. Days and weeks may pass, and the cloud did not move. Then suddenly, perhaps when least expected, the cloud moved! Both the continuance and the change alike were the will of God!

Israel had to be ready to break camp at a moment's notice. Imagine the inconvenience! Some were impatient with God when he delayed moving. Some were impulsive and wanted to get ahead of God. Some were intransigent and wanted to lag behind or return to Egypt!

Notice the seven-fold repetition of the phrase "*at the command of the Lord they marched/camped.*" Notice the two-fold repetition of the phrase "*they kept the Lord's charge.*" It was all about obedience to God. The phrase "*they kept the Lord's charge*" in Hebrew connotes the notion of pulling guard duty!

Brown: The cloud demanded their obedience to God. The Lord does his part in providing them with the guiding cloud, but they must do theirs in responding to his directions: At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped (**18**). The narrative contains eight references to the Lord's orders and the Israelites' obedient response (**18, 20, 23**). If only they had maintained their teachable and compliant spirit! The story of Numbers is a perpetual warning against the danger of knowing what God demands but failing to do it.

Iain Duguid: Israel was on the verge of a new start here at the end of **Numbers 9**. They were about to set out from Mount Sinai where they had been camping for almost a year. It was there at Mount Sinai that God gave them his Law and the instructions for building the tabernacle, as we see in the book of Exodus. It was there that he taught them about his sacrifices and the priesthood, as recorded in the book of Leviticus. It was there that he arranged the camp and prepared them to set out on this journey, as we have seen already in the book of Numbers. Now it was time for the talking and preparing to end and for the action to start. It was time for the Israelites to put their feet into motion and begin the journey into the wilderness, marching toward the Promised Land. That was a challenging prospect for Israel. There was so much that was unknown. Where would they camp? What would they eat and drink? When would they get there? Would their mission be a success? There must have been quite a few uneasy hearts in the camp.

There was one thing that was not to be an unknown, however. They wouldn't have to go into the wilderness alone: God was going to go with them. The central focus of the second half of **Numbers 9** is to underline the connection between the cloud and the tabernacle. The tabernacle was the visible symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people, the tent of their heavenly King at the center of the camp. It was not just an empty symbol, however: it was inhabited by the cloud of God's glory that descended onto it on the very day it was first set up (v. **15**). This descent of God's glory demonstrated that God would indeed dwell in the midst of his people. What is

more, the book of Exodus ended with the recounting of the same event (40:34–38). By repeating it here, the narrator is linking this new journey into the wilderness with the journey in the book of Exodus that took them to Sinai in the first place. Just as God had accompanied them out of Egypt on the way to Mount Sinai by means of the pillar of cloud and fire, so now the same pillar would rest on the tabernacle. God was indeed present with his people. Here was comfort for uneasy hearts.

Wiersbe: The Israelites were a pilgrim people, marching through the wilderness like an army, and they constantly needed the guidance of God. Their goal was the Promised Land, and the God who delivered them from Egypt promised to bring them into their inheritance if they would trust Him and obey His will.

Harrison: This section recapitulates the events of Ex. 40:34 and describes in greater detail the significance of the cloud that had settled on the Tabernacle. To that extent the material helps to integrate the narratives of Exodus and numbers into the same chronological sequence.

I. (:15-16) PHENOMENA OF THE CLOUD AND THE FIRE SIGNIFYING THE PRESENCE OF GOD

A. (:15) Appearance of the Cloud and the Fire

1. Appearance of the Cloud

“Now on the day that the tabernacle was erected the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony,”

J. Ligon Duncan: The cloud is a picture, whether by day or night, of God’s nearness to and presence with His people. The cloud makes visible God’s nearness to and presence with His people. If the tabernacle serves as a tangible, material reminder that God is dwelling in the midst of His people and that His people meet with Him in this appointed place of meeting, which God has commanded and described and called for the construction of.

So the cloud is a supernatural manifestation of God dwelling in the midst of His people, and it’s not surprising that the cloud rests upon the tabernacle itself. As the tabernacle is the visible, tangible place where the people of God see the nearness of God to them, so the cloud supernaturally makes God’s nearness to and presence with the people of God visible. And so it shows God’s guiding and guarding of the children of Israel, His providence, and His protection. It serves to show them when they are to move out and when they are to camp. And so the cloud is a symbol, a supernatural act of God, of tremendous significance to the children of Israel.

Harrison: Some commentators have thought that the cloudy pillar of the Exodus and the cloud that descended on the Tabernacle were identical. Although this is possible, Thompson is probably correct in supposing that there were two different phenomena involved: (1) the guiding cloud, and (2) the cloud of God’s presence. In any event, the very fact that a cloud was in existence in the wilderness in such close proximity to the

ground is an amazing occurrence in itself, since clouds are unusual features of the wilderness environment. . .

Its brightness by night proclaimed God's sovereignty, while its darkness during the day concealed His majesty. The lifting of the cloud would constitute the signal for the tribes of Israel to move their camp, and conversely, when the cloud halted at a particular place, the tribes pitched their tents and remained in that location until the cloud rose once more.

2. Appearance of the Fire

“and in the evening it was like the appearance of fire over the tabernacle, until morning.”

B. (:16a) Consistent Pattern of the Cloud and the Fire

“So it was continuously;”

Brown: The cloud inspired their confidence in God. Despite their evident failings, he had promised to go with them and here was a visible sign of his reliable presence. There were times when their hearts willfully or carelessly turned away from him, but he did not remove the cloud: That is how it continued to be. He had promised in his firm agreement that they could count on his unfailing companionship throughout their days. Day and night it was a continuing reassurance to the travelers and a serious warning to their enemies: God was with them.

C. (:16b) Appearance of the Cloud and the Fire

1. Appearance of the Cloud

“the cloud would cover it by day,”

2. Appearance of the Fire

“and the appearance of fire by night.”

3 DESCRIPTIONS OF THE LORD'S GUIDANCE:

**II. (:17-18) DESCRIPTION #1: DEPARTURE AND ENCAMPMENT
REGULATED BY THE LORD –
EMPHASIS ON DIVINE GUIDANCE DICTATING ISRAEL'S MOVEMENTS**

A. (:17) Function of Guidance Provided by the Cloud of God's Presence

1. Regarding Departure

“And whenever the cloud was lifted from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out;”

2. Regarding Encampment

“and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp.”

Ronald Allen: This phrasing [The English rendering “*shekinah*” is built on the verb meaning “*to dwell*”] symbolizes both God’s nearness and his remoteness. He is present as a cloud but hovers above; he is near as a fire, but one cannot draw very close.

B. (:18) Regulation of Guidance Provided by the Command of the Lord

1. Regarding Departure

“At the command of the LORD the sons of Israel would set out,”

Robert Rayburn: “*At the Lord’s command*” is the theme of this passage and its repetition in the following verses emphasizes it. They made their journey “*at the Lord’s command*” as it was expressed by the movement of the cloud, starting when it lifted from the sanctuary and stopping when it settled over it again and enveloped it. Israel’s march was directed by God, not man; not even by Moses

2. Regarding Encampment

a. Fact of Encampment

“and at the command of the LORD they would camp;”

b. Duration of Encampment

“as long as the cloud settled over the tabernacle, they remained camped.”

III. (:19-22) DESCRIPTION #2: ENCAMPMENT AND DEPARTURE REGULATED BY THE LORD – EMPHASIS ON THE UNPREDICTABLE NATURE OF THE DIVINE PLAN

A. (:19) Necessity of Patience vs. Presumption

“Even when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle for many days, the sons of Israel would keep the LORD’s charge and not set out.”

Ronald Allen: The movement of the cloud and its presence were unpredictable, without discernable pattern. This was to impress on the people the sense that it was God who was leading them, not some pattern of creation nor some whim from above.

B. (:20) Encampment Might Last a Few Days – Uncertainty of Timing

1. Encampment

“If sometimes the cloud remained a few days over the tabernacle, according to the command of the LORD they remained camped.”

2. Departure

“Then according to the command of the LORD they set out.”

C. (:21) Encampment Might Be Very Short – Urgency of Moving Out

1. Be Ready to Move Out

“If sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning, when the cloud was lifted in the morning, they would move out;”

2. Be Ready to Move Out

*“or if it remained in the daytime and at night,
whenever the cloud was lifted, they would set out.”*

D. (:22) Encampment Might Last for a Long Time – Hold Your Water

1. Encampment

*“Whether it was two days or a month or a year that the cloud lingered
over the tabernacle, staying above it, the sons of Israel remained
camped and did not set out;”*

2. Departure

“but when it was lifted, they did set out.”

**IV. (:23) DESCRIPTION #3: ENCAMPMENT AND DEPARTURE
REGULATED BY THE LORD –
EMPHASIS ON CONSISTENT OBEDIENCE TO THE LORD’S COMMAND**

A. Guidance

1. Encampment

“At the command of the LORD they camped,”

2. Departure

“and at the command of the LORD they set out;”

C.H.M.: A more lovely picture of absolute dependence upon and subjection to divine guidance it were impossible to conceive than that presented in the foregoing paragraph. There was not a footprint or a landmark throughout that *“great and terrible wilderness.”* It was therefore useless to look for any guidance from those who had gone before. They were wholly cast upon God for every step of the way; they were in a position of constant waiting upon Him. This to an unsubdued mind – an unbroken will, would be intolerable; but to a soul knowing, loving, confiding, and delighting in God, nothing could be more deeply blessed. . .

There is nothing in all this world more deeply blessed than to lead a life of habitual dependence upon God; to hang upon Him moment by moment, to wait on Him and cling to Him for everything, to have all our sprigs in Him; it is the true secret of peace, and of holy independence of the creature.. The soul that can really say, “All my springs are in Thee” is lifted above all creature-confidences, human hopes, and earthly expectations.

B. Obedience

1. To the Lord

“they kept the LORD's charge,”

David Thompson: Verse 23 says they kept the command of the Lord. If Israel's story would have stopped at verse 23, it would have been a great story. But it did not. This kind of commitment to God and His Word did not last long.

2. Through the Mediatorial Leadership of Moses

*“according to **the command of the LORD** through Moses.”*

Ronald Allen: The level of the tragedy of their subsequent disobedience is heightened by this paragraph of great obedience.

What role do spiritual leaders play in discerning God's guidance in your life today?

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why so much repetition in this short section?
- 2) To what extent are your movements dictated by divine guidance?
- 3) How do you respond to the unpredictable nature of divine guidance and of His plan for your life?
- 4) How consistent is your obedience to the Lord's leading?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Wenham: The irregularity of the lines shows this is not true poetry: rather it is elevated prose, expressing the excitement of the occasion. The newly organized nation with its God-given system of worship is about to set out from Sinai for the promised land. This section describes how this journey is to be undertaken. The thrice-repeated refrain sums it up, *‘At the command of the Lord they encamped, and at the command of the Lord they set out’* (20, 23; cf. 18). The cloud hovering over the tabernacle provided the perfect means of divine guidance: the people had to respond with perfect obedience.

The real and visible presence of God among his people was his response to their obedience in building the tabernacle (15). But this section is placed immediately after the account of the celebration of the second passover. The cloud of God's presence first appeared after the first passover (Exod. 13:21–22). The tabernacle could be built only once, but the festivals of redemption were to be celebrated regularly. This narrative, therefore, looks beyond the wilderness situation, in which Israel could follow God's leading in an immediate way, to a time when its faithfulness to the Lord would be demonstrated by their keeping of the festivals.

The New Testament also uses cloud imagery to describe the presence of God. Our Lord was overshadowed by the cloud at his transfiguration, and disappeared into a cloud at his ascension (**Luke 9:34; Acts 1:9**). He indeed was the perfect tabernacle in which ‘*the Word ... dwelt among us*’ (**John 1:14**). Paul and Peter both compare the body to a tent, a temporary dwelling to be replaced after death (**2 Cor. 5:1–4; 2 Pet. 1:13–14**). Like the tabernacle, the Christian’s body is no empty tent, but a temple for the Spirit (**1 Cor. 6:19**). Filled by the Spirit he may follow in his Lord’s footsteps and resist the temptations of Satan even in the wilderness (**Luke 4:1ff.**). ‘*Let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through.*’

Timothy Ashley: This passage expands the obedience formula of **Exod. 40:36–38**, thus framing the legislation that issued from the tabernacle (**Lev. 1:1–Num. 9:14**) with the theme of God’s presence with his people in the cloud and the fire. Added to the theme of divine presence is the further statement of the people’s exact and complete obedience to Yahweh.

The passage itself is bipartite and can be divided along thematic lines. **Vv. 15–16** bring forth the old theme of God’s presence in the sanctuary in the midst of the people. The elevated prose section of **vv. 17–23** emphasizes the theme of exact obedience to God. This section (along with **10:1–10**) rounds off the material about the sojourn at Mt. Sinai, although the point of view of the section is already that of the march and encampment. **Vv. 17–23**, while not actually poetry, share with poetry such features as parallelism and repetition. The most outstanding feature of the section is the repeated formula “*according to the command of Yahweh*” (*‘al pî YHWH*), which is expanded in various ways in **vv. 18, 20, 23a, and 23b**.

Roy Gane: For the Israelites to be with God’s resident Presence, called “*Shekinah*” in rabbinic Hebrew, they must move with him. It is no use lingering to venerate the spot where he has been. Nor is it worthwhile trying to guess where he may go next and running ahead to get there first. Often he gives no reason for what he does. The important thing is to know where his cloud is and to follow it.

God’s leadership calls for readiness to move at any time, and also patience to stay put until he directs otherwise. For an individual who wants to set his or her own agenda, this arrangement can be intensely irritating and unsettling. But it is fine for someone who wants to be with God more than anything else. Such a person can feel content, like a baby carried by a parent, unworried about the specifics of the route as long as Mama or Papa is there.

It is not that divine leading is a shortcut to do away with decisions and risks. “Indeed, God wants us to develop good judgment, and there is no way to develop it apart from a process that involves choices and risks.” But his guidance serves as a Global Positioning System, a dynamic reference point and framework for navigating the challenges of the way.

The Lord doesn't merely give his people a detailed map of their "journey" that shows when they will reach "rest stops," "filling stations," and their final destination. He himself is their map.

Believer's Study Bible: The last matter needing attention before the departure from Sinai was the means by which God would guide His people in the wilderness. The cloud (vv. 15-23) was already present. It was the visible sign of Yahweh's presence and His moving with His people (cf. **Gen. 28:15**). Its movements indicated the guidance of God. When the glory of God filled the Most Holy Place, the cloud lingered above, and the people would remain encamped. When the cloud moved from the tabernacle, the people moved (cf. **Ex. 13:21**, note). The Decalogue, which summarized the principles of God's covenant with Israel, was contained in the ark of the Testimony as the promise of God's gracious presence inside the tabernacle, just as the cloud outside represented the pledge of His presence. This cloud has often been referred to as the "Shekinah," a nonbiblical term which first appears in the Aramaic Targums. The term was employed in the Talmud also and means "that which dwells."

G. Campbell Morgan: Our chapter brings us to the moment when everything was ready, so far as Divine provision was concerned, for the march to the promised land. The hosts of God waited only for the Divine will. This was to be made known through the cloud. The first appearing of this cloud was in connection with the actual exodus, and from henceforth it was the appointed symbol and token of the Divine presence. It was a remarkably suggestive one, at once mystic and revealing. There has been a good deal of speculation as to the nature of this cloud. It is surely best, reverently to consider it as a supernatural manifestation, indicating the presence and guidance of God. The instructions given were most definite, that the people were only to move in obedience to the movement of the cloud. It was at once a beneficent and drastic provision. It lifted all responsibility from them, except that of simple obedience. They were not called upon to consider the time or direction of their march, but they were not allowed to object or delay. We have no longer any such visible means of guidance, but the guidance is as sure for us as for them; and it is given to us to know it by the life of maintained fellowship with the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. In proportion as that is maintained by our fulfilling of the true conditions, there need be no place or time in which we may not discover what is the will of God for us

Gordon Keddie: Significance of this phenomenon of the cloud to believers today:

1) God reveals himself to us --

Israel knew exactly where they stood with the living God, because he had explicitly, repeatedly and clearly revealed his will for their lives. . . The cloud and fiery pillar are no more, but the Word of God endures for ever.

2) God is present with his people –

The cloud was visible over the tabernacle, twenty-four hours a day. As such, it proclaimed to Israel that the Lord was with them, that he would protect them and that he would lead them.

3) God assures his people of his particular love and blessing –

This was true in their *waiting*, when the cloud descended. Waiting is always a challenge to patience. . .

The same is true of our *going on* with the Lord. In the doing of his will, the tokens of his particular care for us become clear to discerning hearts.

TEXT: Numbers 10:1-10

TITLE: *USE OF THE SILVER SIGNAL TRUMPETS FOR WORSHIP AND FOR MOBILIZATION*

BIG IDEA:
GOD COMMUNICATES HIS FAVORABLE PRESENCE WITH HIS REDEEMED PEOPLE VIA CLEAR SIGNALS

INTRODUCTION:

The subject of how God guides His people in their wilderness journey continues with this presentation of the use of the silver signal trumpets. God wants Israel to be reassured that their covenant sovereign ruler is manifesting His favorable presence in both times of worship (and special feasts) as well as in times of mobilization (and when under special attack by enemies).

Wenham: The trumpets are described by Josephus and pictured on the arch of Titus in Rome. They were straight pipes, a little less than 18 in. (45cm) long with a flared opening at the end. They could be blown in various ways to give different signals. What distinguished blowing and sounding an alarm is uncertain. But if we follow Jewish tradition, long blasts were used to assemble people to Moses, to the tent of meeting and for worship (3–4, 10). Short staccato were used in battle and to order the camps to move off. Each time an alarm was sounded a group of tribes moved off. At the first alarm the tribes to the east of the tabernacle moved off, at the second alarm those on the south, at subsequent blasts those on the west and north (5–6; cf. 2:1–31). It is significant that, as in ancient Egypt, the trumpets were used in war and to summon people to worship. Like the arrangement of the camp with the tabernacle at the middle, and the ordering of the tribes in battle formation, the silver trumpets declare that Israel is the army of the King of kings preparing for a holy war of conquest.

Duguid: The sound of the priestly trumpets was not simply a rallying cry to bring the people of God together either. The sound of the trumpets also brought them to the Lord's remembrance (10:10). As well as being a call for the people to come together and act as one, it was a cry to God to come and act on their behalf. Whenever the Israelites faced their enemies, they could sound the trumpet and know that God would remember them and come to their aid (10:9). Whenever the people brought their offerings at the great festivals, the priests could sound the trumpet and know that God would hear from Heaven and pay attention to their offerings (10:10). Their sins would be forgiven, and their acts of worship would be received and accepted. So the trumpets not only called the people together to renew their obedience but reminded them and assured them of God's continuing presence and favor toward them. It is not coincidental that these themes of presence and obedience are the same themes that we saw highlighted at the end of **Numbers 9**.

The note about the continuing function of the trumpets thus says something profound and enduring about the nature of the journey on which Israel was embarking: the wandering people of God were about to begin a pilgrimage that would revolve around the twin themes of **warfare** and **worship**. That pilgrimage would continue even after they had entered the land. What is more, God's presence and their obedience were absolutely necessary if these tasks were to be carried out successfully.

I. (:1-2) PRIMARY USE OF THE SILVER SIGNAL TRUMPETS

"The LORD spoke further to Moses, saying,"

A. (:2a) 2 Silver Trumpets Commissioned

"Make yourself two trumpets of silver, of hammered work you shall make them;"

David Thompson: Now a silver trumpet would be different than a ram's horn. It would send a louder and more piercing signal. It was straight and would be able of playing more notes. The sound would be clear and could be heard by many. The dimensions of the trumpet are not given, but there was a trumpet found in King Tut's tomb that was about two feet long and tapered from about 3 ½ inches at the bell end to about ½ inch at the mouthpiece. It is similar to the trumpet used at the Kentucky Derby. At the Kentucky Derby, a trumpet can easily be heard by well over 150,000 people.

B. (:2b) 2 Main Purposes = Worship and Mobilization

1. For Worship -- Summoning the Congregation

"and you shall use them for summoning the congregation"

2. For Mobilization -- Mobilizing the Camps

"and for having the camps set out."

C.H.M.: The sound of the trumpet was familiar to every circumcised ear. It was the communication of the mind of God, in a form distinct and simple enough to be understood by every member of the congregation, however distant he might be from the source whence the testimony emanated. God took care that each one in that vast assembly, however far away, should hear the silvery tones of the trumpet of testimony. .

All had to wait upon the divine testimony, and walk in the light thereof the very moment it was given. To move without the testimony would be to **move in the dark**; to refuse to move, when the testimony was given, would be to **remain in the dark**.

II. (:3-7) SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS REGARDING THE SIGNAL TRUMPETS

A. (:3-4) Regarding Summoning

1. (:3) All the Congregation – Blowing Both Trumpets

"And when both are blown, all the congregation shall gather themselves to you at the doorway of the tent of meeting."

2. (:4) Just the Leaders – Blowing Only One Trumpet

“Yet if only one is blown, then the leaders, the heads of the divisions of Israel, shall assemble before you.”

Brown: There was an occasion when only one of the trumpets was to be used: when the leaders—the heads of the clans of Israel—were to assemble (4). This huge community could travel effectively only if it acknowledged the importance of designated leadership. Certain tasks were specifically allocated to chosen individuals, and that proper sense of order and responsibility must be recognized by everyone. For example, these trumpets were made by chosen craftsmen and used only by the sons of Aaron, the priests (8).

Nobody can read this introductory section of the book without appreciating the crucial importance of good leadership (1:4–46; 3:1–4; 3:5–4:49; 10:14–27). These orderly plans for the community were soon challenged by disgruntled Israelites who rejected the authority of Moses and his colleagues; some significant partners disgraced their calling, becoming envious of God’s unique leader (12:1–16; 16:1–3). Dismissing the plea of gifted leaders such as Caleb and Joshua, the grumbling people wanted to choose someone else to take them back to Egypt, even preparing to stone Moses, Aaron, Caleb and Joshua (14:1–10).

B. (:5-6) Regarding Mobilizing

1. (:5) Camps on the East Side – Blowing First Alarm

*“But when you blow an alarm,
the camps that are pitched on the east side shall set out.”*

MacArthur: The exact difference between the blowing for the gathering at the tabernacle and for the march is not known. Jewish tradition said the convocation sound was a long steady blast, while the advance signal was a succession of 3 shorter ones.

Ashley: The exact difference between the two is not known; it may have been a difference in tone, duration, or both.

2. (:6) Camps on the South Side – Blowing Second Alarm

*“And when you blow an
alarm the second time, the camps that are pitched on the south side
shall set out; an alarm is to be blown for them to set out.”*

No mention is made of the western or northern tribes, but we may assume that they as well had their own signals.

C. (:7) No Alarm Sounded When Calling the Assembly

*“When convening the assembly, however,
you shall blow without sounding an alarm.”*

III. (:8) BLOWING THE SIGNAL TRUMPETS RESTRICTED TO AARONIC PRIESTHOOD

A. Restriction Commanded

“The priestly sons of Aaron, moreover, shall blow the trumpets;”

B. Restriction Perpetuated

“and this shall be for you a perpetual statute throughout your generations.”

Ashley: The exact difference between the two is not known; it may have been a difference in tone, duration, or both.

IV. (:9-10) ADDITIONAL USE OF THE SIGNAL TRUMPETS – FIGHTING AND FEASTING

A. (:9) Fighting -- Going to War Against Invading Enemies

1. When to Blow the Trumpets

“And when you go to war in your land against the adversary who attacks you, then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets,”

2. Why to Blow the Trumpets

“that you may be remembered before the LORD your God, and be saved from your enemies.”

Ronald Allen: By blowing the trumpets before the battle, Israel confidently could expect God’s active presence in the battle scene. The blowing of these trumpets prepared the people for the presence of God.

B. (:10) Feasting - Celebrating Appointed Feasts and New Moon Festivals

1. When to Blow the Trumpets

“Also in the day of your gladness and in your appointed feasts, and on the first days of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings;”

Eugene Merrill: This use of the trumpets was not so much to announce these various festivals as to invoke and celebrate the presence of God among His people on those special occasions. They would each be a memorial for the people before God, a kind of reminder of His guidance and blessing in the past, particularly in the wilderness.

2. Why to Blow the Trumpets

“and they shall be as a reminder of you before your God. I am the LORD your God.”

Brown: The divine declaration that closes the book’s first main section inspired the travelers’ confidence: *I am the LORD your God (10)*. Its familiar words had introduced their covenant obligations and had been repeated throughout Leviticus. This unique

assertion recalled his power, described his uniqueness, and reiterated his promise. As they left Sinai, this reassuring affirmation was a call to remember his faithfulness, reflect his character and trust his word.

Dennis Cole: In the context of battle, the trumpets served as a prayer by which the covenant relationship between God and Israel was invoked, and thus they reminded soldiers that God remembers and delivers his people. The covenant themes of remembrance, deliverance, and blessing provide continuity with other portions of the Pentateuch. These themes appear from Noah (**Gen 8:1; 9:1–17**), to Abraham (**Gen 19:29**), to Rachel (**Gen 30:22**), to the Israelites in Egypt (**Exod 2:24**), and even into the realm of exile (**Lev 26:40–45**). The connection between festival rejoicing and battling against one’s enemies echoes the words of the covenant reiteration in **Exod 34:22–24**.

The concluding phrase of the Sinai cycles, “*I am Yahweh your God,*” sets forth in profoundly plain terms the sovereignty of God over the nation. As **Harrison** notes, “He is the supreme Lord and ruler of His people Israel. The nation is the visible expression of His existence, personality, and saving power. Without Him they are meaningless, but they have been chosen specifically out of His abundant love to be a witness to the surrounding nations because of their constitution as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (**Exod 19:6**).”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Do you feel that God communicates with you via clear signals or in a confused fashion?
- 2) What gives you reassurance that God hears your prayers and has your best interests at heart as He guides you through life?
- 3) What role did the Aaronic priests play in the military deployment of the Israelite forces?
- 4) How important are worship assemblies and the gathering together for special memorial observances in the life of God’s redeemed people?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Roy Gane: Different types of trumpet blasts signal a variety of activities, to which a wide range of emotions are associated. Variables in trumpet calls include

- (1) one or two trumpets,
- (2) the kind of blast: long (Qal of tq‘) or short (teru‘ah or Hiphil of rw‘), and

(3) the number of blasts.

Signal blasts included the following:

Assemble sanctuary	at	<i>long on 2 trumpets</i> : community assembles at sanctuary court (10:3, 7) <i>long on 1 trumpet</i> : chieftains assemble at sanctuary court (10:4)
Break camp for travel		<i>1st short</i> : tribes camping east of sanctuary set out (10:5) <i>2d short</i> : tribes camping south of sanctuary set out (10:6) <i>3rd short</i> : tribes camping west of sanctuary set out (understood; LXX 10:6 ; cf. 2:24 ; 10:22) <i>4th short</i> : tribes camping north of sanctuary set out (understood; LXX 10:6 ; cf. 2:31 ; 10:25)
Go to war		<i>short</i> : Israelites go to war in their land against oppressors (10:9)
Celebrate		<i>long</i> : Israelites celebrate religious joyful times, appointed festivals, new moons (10:10)

Notice that with regard to the distinction between the two kinds of trumpet blasts, the order of presentation in the text is **chiastic**, optimistically ending with celebration:

long: assemble
 short: break camp
 short: go to war
 long: celebrate

Unlike assembly and celebration (both long), breaking camp and going to war (both short) involve moving out. In fact, whenever the Israelite war camp went on the march, it was implicitly going to war. Use of the noun *teru'ah* or the corresponding Hiphil of *rw'* for short blasts to signal march/war is appropriate in view of the fact that the same Hebrew terminology can elsewhere denote a battle shout (e.g., **Josh. 6:5, 10, 16, 20; Amos 1:14**). To specify that the martial sound is produced on a trumpet, **Numbers 10** must either mention the instrument (**10:9**) or use *tq'* before *teru'ah* as the generic term for sounding a trumpet (**10:5–6**).

Brueggemann: God ordered the fabrication of signaling trumpets, which would be used for the wilderness march (**10:2–8**) and later in the land (**10:9–10**). While on the march they were for calling assemblies (**10:2–3**) and signaling the break of camp (**10:2, 5**). One call would start the Judah corps on the move (**10:5**), then a second would signal the Reuben corps to move out (**10:6**). No further signals are mentioned for the three Levitical families (**2:17**), Ephraimites (**2:18–24**), or Danites (**2:25–31**), though the pattern of calls already established may have simply continued. Only the priests could blow these trumpets (**10:8**), whether on the march (**10:2–8**) or in the land (**10:9–10**). One might have expected civil or at least military leaders to blow these signaling trumpets. But priests were an integral part of warfare, addressing the warriors before battle (**Deut 20:2–4**), giving them God's battle guidance (**27:18–21; Judg 20:26–28; 1 Sam 23:9; 30:7**), and carrying the Ark and blowing the trumpets for battle (**10:33–36; Josh 6; 1 Sam 4; 2 Sam 11:11**).

In the land, the trumpets would be blown “*in times of gladness*” (**10:10**), which might

be coronation days (e.g., **2 Kgs 11:14; 1 Chr 29:22**), victory celebrations (**10:9; Esth 8:17; 9:17**), or the annual festivals (**2 Chr 30:21, 23, 26; Ezra 6:22; Neh 8:17**). The trumpets would also be blown “*over ... burnt offerings*” (**10:10**, mentioned only here and at **2 Chr 29:26–30**).

“*The trumpet blasts serve also as a prayer*” (Milgrom 1989:75; cf. **2 Chr 13:12–16**). Any time the trumpet sounded, the people would have heard a note of reminder, “*I am the Lord your God*” (**10:10**), and God would have heard Israel’s testimony that they were his people. That was God’s central covenant promise (**Lev 26:12**), which was echoed by the prophets (**Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek 34:31; 36:28; Joel 2:27**) and apostles (**2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3**). Reminders are an important motif in Numbers (**5:15; 16:36–38; 17:10; 31:54**).

Duguid: So too for us, the trumpets that we now hear summoning us to spiritual warfare and spiritual worship are not the only trumpets there will be. One day the final trumpet will sound, announcing the definitive arrival of God’s presence on earth (**1 Corinthians 15:52**). This time it will not be in the form of a fiery pillar or as a baby at Bethlehem, but in the triumphant return of Jesus Christ to establish the new heavens and the new earth. The final trumpet will sound, and the dead in Christ will rise, and those believers who are still alive will be caught up into his presence (**1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17**). Then our wandering and our warfare will finally be over, replaced forever by worship. But for all those who do not belong to Christ, that day of God’s presence will be a day of great fear and anguish. They will hear the dreaded words, “*Depart from me, you cursed*” and will be sent out of the presence of God into the blackest darkness forever (**Matthew 25:41**).

David Silversides: The Lord is With His People

Importance of the manifestation of the favorable presence of the Lord with His people;

1. Biblical Priorities (:1-10)

2 silver trumpets –

- Appointed by the Lord Himself
- To be blown by the sons of Aaron – part of the ceremonial pattern of worship
- Usage of these trumpets
 - o To assemble the congregation at the tabernacle of the congregation – the call to worship
 - o To give marching orders to move forward – the call to take the Promised Land and enjoy deeper fellowship
 - o As an alarm for war against invading enemy – the call to spiritual battle
 - o As an outward token, God-appointed token, that they would be remembered by God in warfare; steadfast covenant relationship; spiritual conflict behind the physical warfare – reminded the people of the Lord’s promise to fight for them (the Lord doesn’t need to be reminded but we need reassurance that He remembers His people)
 - o To be used at the appointed feasts – **Ps 81:3-4**

The trumpets were meant to be heard above all the noise of the camp; call of the Lord must be heard; other things are subordinate; our activities have no meaning apart from

following the Lord

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=82610143130>

TEXT: Numbers 10:11-36

TITLE: *FOLLOWING THE CLOUD AS THE JOURNEY BEGINS*

BIG IDEA:

DIVINE GUIDANCE DIRECTS THE ISRAELITES TO BREAK CAMP AT SINAI AND BEGIN THEIR JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND

INTRODUCTION:

Most commentators argue that this passage begins the second major section in the book of Numbers – since they base their outline on the geographical location markers. My outline has the second section starting with the next paragraph in 11:1 since that is the thematic division for when things start to go bad for the nation of Israel with their grumbling and challenging of authority. In either case, this text comes at a very important juncture and marks the culmination of all of the preparations that the nation has been making to set out on their journey to the Promised Land. It is a momentous occasion when the cloud finally lifts and the Lord directs His people to set out on their wilderness journey. We see much faith and optimism as their vision is focused on the visible reminders of the favorable presence of their covenant God = the cloud and the ark of the covenant. God goes before them as their Victorious Warrior to lead them into battle as they are properly arrayed in order by their various tribes. Sadly, their unity and obedience and commitment to spiritual authority will quickly erode as they encounter various pressures and trials.

Iain Duguid: In this passage in **Numbers 10** we receive our first impression of Israel on the march, and what we see is entirely positive. They began the journey so well. In fact, if they had continued in the same way that they started out, they would have been in the Promised Land within a few short weeks. First impressions can be deceptive though. As we will see, things began to unravel in short order as the journey continued.

Nonetheless, it is important to notice the fact that Israel began well. This shows that the problems that subsequently developed were not due to ignorance on Israel's part or a lack of clarity on the Lord's part. God was faithful to do what he had promised, and the Israelites knew exactly what they ought to do. The problems that would soon emerge were thus entirely their own fault.

Ashley: The theme of this passage is Israel's glorious leadership by Yahweh as the people depart from the Mountain of God for an immediate conquest of Canaan. There is no sense here of the impending doom that awaits Israel's rebellion in the wilderness

Brueggemann: So far in the story, the people had been at Sinai, but now they began a three-stage journey: from Sinai to Kadesh (**10:11–12:16**), the 40 years near Kadesh (**13:1–19:22**), and finally the move from Kadesh to Moab (**20:1–21:35**). Up until this point in Numbers, they have demonstrated exemplary obedience, but now anarchy breaks out. The people (**11:1–8**), and even Miriam and Aaron (**12:1–5**), complain about Moses. Eventually it degenerates into mutiny as the people refuse to enter the Promised

Land (14:1–10), and it also degenerates into Levitical anarchy as Korah refuses to acknowledge priestly leadership (16:1–30). The result is that the whole mutinous generation was consigned to death in the desert rather than life in the land (21:21–35).

Gordon Keddie: Beginning a new venture is always exciting. The passage conveys a vivid sense of that fresh enthusiasm, and does so in three stages: first, by describing something of the panoply of Israel’s power as the nation moved off at God’s command (10:11-28); second, in Moses’ invitation to the non-Hebrew Hobab to come to Canaan with them (10:29-32); and finally in the picture of people led by their God towards their unfolding destiny (10:33-36). . .

Israel made a good start. The first hurdle had been negotiated and they were on their way. They ought to have continued as they began. They had every reason to expect great things from God and every motive to attempt great things for him. But, as we shall see, their progress was soon to be compromised by a spirit of discontent and rebellion against the Lord.

I. (:11-13) TIME TO MOVE OUT IN OBEDIENCE TO THE LORD – THE LAUNCH OF THE MARCH = THE DEPARTURE FROM SINAI TO PARAN

A. (:11-12a) Lifting of the Cloud from the Wilderness of Mt. Sinai

1. Timeframe

“Now it came about in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month,”

Ashley: The departure date here is over eleven months after their arrival at the mountain, nearly fourteen months after their departure from Egypt, and nineteen days after the census of 1:1.

2. Divine Guidance to Depart

“that the cloud was lifted from over the tabernacle of the testimony;”

Israel probably had become quite comfortable in staying in this same location for almost a year. Yet now God calls her to commence a difficult but promising journey that has as its final destination the blessings of the Promised Land.

3. Obedience to the Lord’s Command

“and the sons of Israel set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai.”

B. (:12b) Settling Down of the Cloud in the Wilderness of Paran

“Then the cloud settled down in the wilderness of Paran.”

Wenham: Verse 12 summarizes several days journeyings. Stops were made at Kibroth-hattaavah and Hazeroth before they finally reached the wilderness of Paran (11:35;

12:16). This is the largest and most barren of the wildernesses traversed by the Israelites, covering much of the Northern Sinai peninsula and some of the Southern Negeb and Arabah (**Gen. 21:21; Num. 13:26; 1 Kgs 11:18**).

Harrison: The statement of **10:12** is a summary of the journey, the details of which occupy **10:13 – 12:16**.

C. (:13) Moving in Accordance with God’s Guidance

“So they moved out for the first time according to the commandment of the LORD through Moses.”

II. (:14-28) IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING THE ORDER PRESCRIBED BY THE LORD TO EQUIP THEM FOR WARFARE AS THEY FOCUS ON HIS PRESENCE --

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE MARCH

A. (:14-16) Camp of Judah

1. (:14) Judah

“And the standard of the camp of the sons of Judah, according to their armies, set out first, with Nahshon the son of Amminadab, over its army,”

2. (:15) Issachar

“and Nethanel the son of Zuar, over the tribal army of the sons of Issachar;”

3. (:16) Zebulun

“and Eliab the son of Helon over the tribal army of the sons of Zebulun.”

B. (:17) Transportation of the Tabernacle

“Then the tabernacle was taken down; and the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari, who were carrying the tabernacle, set out.”

Wenham: Then came the Gershonites and Merarites carrying the curtains and poles of the tabernacle on the ox carts (**17**; cf. **4:21–45; 7:2–8**). This detail is not mentioned in **chapter 2**, which does not differentiate between the Kohathites marching in the middle of the procession, and the Merarites and Gershonites going ahead of them. The latter arrangement was adopted so that the tabernacle could be set up before the most sacred objects carried by the Kohathites arrived (**21**). These could then be immediately placed inside the tent.

C. (:18-20) Camp of Reuben

1. (:18) Reuben

“Next the standard of the camp of Reuben, according to their armies, set out with Elizur the son of Shedeur, over its army,”

2. (:19) Simeon

*“and Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai
over the tribal army of the sons of Simeon,”*

3. (:20) Gad

*“and Eliasaph the son of Deuel
was over the tribal army of the sons of Gad.”*

D. (:21) Role of the Kohathites with the Holy Objects

*“Then the Kohathites set out, carrying the holy objects;
and the tabernacle was set up before their arrival.”*

Wenham: i.e. the table for the showbread, the lampstand, the incense altar and the altar of burnt offering and maybe the ark as well (4:5–15), though **verse 33** implies that this went first of all, some way ahead of the main procession.

E. (:22-24) Camp of Ephraim

1. (:22) Ephraim

*“Next the standard of the camp of the sons of Ephraim,
according to their armies, was set out,
with Elishama the son of Ammihud over its army,”*

2. (:23) Manasseh

*“and Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur
over the tribal army of the sons of Manasseh;”*

3. (:24) Benjamin

*“and Abidan the son of Gideoni
over the tribal army of the sons of Benjamin.”*

F. (:25-27) Camp of Dan

1. (:25) Dan

*“Then the standard of the camp of the sons of Dan, according to their
armies, which formed the rear guard for all the camps, set out, with
Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai over its army,”*

2. (:26) Asher

*“and Pagiël the son of Ochrân
over the tribal army of the sons of Asher;”*

3. (:27) Naphtali

*“and Ahira the son of Enan
over the tribal army of the sons of Naphtali.”*

G. (:28) Summary

“This was the order of march of the sons of Israel by their armies as they set out.”

Dennis Cole: Seven groups in all followed the cloud/pillar as they journeyed from Mount Sinai into the surrounding wilderness. The order and symmetry of the beginning of the journey from the mountain of God, the place where the nation has been constituted, to the Promised Land, where the fulfillment of that nationhood was to be confirmed, echo the essential themes of the first two cycles of the Book of Numbers: unity and harmony, purity and faithfulness. The people of God move out in harmonious accord, faithful to the Lord’s leading through the cloud pillar and the ark of the covenant, the symbols of his presence with them in a miracle of nature and in the focal point of the relationship between God and his people. The ark of the covenant was the place of ultimate mediation between God and humanity, symbolized in the ritual activity of the Day of Atonement (**Lev 16:1–34**) and in the verbal expression of the covenant in the two tablets placed within the chest covered by the mercy seat. Revelation through the natural world and through his word have been essential elements in the relationship between God and man since the creation, when God conversed with Adam in the garden. Despite Israel’s rebellion, God continued to reveal himself in nature and through history in his prophetic revelation to bring about the ultimate promise of redemption in Christ Jesus.

III. (:29-36) THREE KEY TYPES OF ASSISTANCE THAT WILL CONTRIBUTE TO VICTORY -- THE REINFORCEMENTS FOR THE MARCH

A. (:29-32) Soliciting the Scouting Assistance of Hobab Who Knows the Terrain

1. (:29) The Pitch

“Then Moses said to Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law, ‘We are setting out to the place of which the LORD said, ‘I will give it to you’; come with us and we will do you good, for the LORD has promised good concerning Israel.’”

Dennis Cole: The title “son of Reuel” can mean that he was the direct “offspring” of Reuel or that he belonged to the “clan” of Reuel. The latter definition of clanship is preferred here. The relationship of Reuel to Moses as *ḥōtēn*, usually translated as “father-in-law” is echoed in **Judg 1:16** and **4:11**, in which these relatives of Moses by marriage are also identified with the Kenites. By comparison with **Exod 2:18–3:1**, where Reuel is also called Jethro, who is also called the *ḥōtēn Mōšeh*, here he is obviously the “father-in-law” of Moses. **Mitchell** has demonstrated that the term *ḥōtēn* refers to a “relation by marriage.”

Wiersbe: Hobab was Moses’ brother-in-law, the son of Raguel, who was also known as Reuel and Jethro (**Ex. 2:15 – 3:1**). It’s likely that Jethro was now dead and Hobab was head of the family.

Brown: Scripture is gloriously balanced. In the preceding verses, the strong emphasis on total obedience to God’s commands might create the impression that all we need to do is to wait on him and to pursue his course for us, independent of other people’s help, advice and support. The narrative’s next item contradicts such insularity. Although Moses had the assurance of the guiding cloud (9:15–23) and the commanding voice (10:13), he still hoped for the support of human companions. His Midianite brother-in-law, Hobab, was now eager to return to his own people. During the preceding months Moses had often been impressed by Hobab’s innate skills. He was well acquainted with the vagaries of the desert’s weather patterns, the sudden force of contrary winds and the best places to pitch their tents for maximum protection. Hobab knew everything there was to know about the wilderness, and Moses longed to have alongside him a colleague with native skill and ability.

The Midianite rejected Moses’ initial invitation, having no desire to move to a totally different country. Moses urged him to come, and Hobab eventually consented. Although Moses was a towering and effective leader figure, he was also a mere man, with all the natural hesitancy and fears anyone would feel on the verge of such a massive enterprise. This story reveals ‘his humanity in its weakness (needing help) and in its strength (seeking help)’. He was eager for all the help he could get. The story relates Moses’ persuasive testimony as he shared with Hobab what God had said and done.

2. (:30) The Reluctance

“But he said to him, ‘I will not come, but rather will go to my own land and relatives.’”

Hobab initially refused the offer, but when pressed by Moses apparently relented for it is recorded that some of his posterity gained an inheritance in the land (see **Judges 1:16**).

Harrison: Hobab was evidently unimpressed with Moses’ Proposal, even though it contained the assurance of divine blessing. The attraction of his homeland was uppermost in his feelings, probably more so because his father had departed earlier, and in any event Hobab did not appear anxious to commit himself to Moses for even the few weeks that would have been required for a journey directly from Mount Sinai to the southern border of Canaan

3. (:31-32) The Closing Argument

a. (:31) Your Assistance is Invaluable

“Then he said, ‘Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you will be as eyes for us.’”

Roy Gane: When God is leading, prospering, protecting, and/or giving victory, he can participate and bring about his purposes providentially through human activity (cf. **Gen. 45:5–8**). Even when he provided a miracle at Jericho, he had the Israelites cooperate

with him by entering and taking the city. Similarly, it appears that Moses saw Hobab's potential for enhancing the quality of Israel's desert experience and cooperation with the Lord by guiding some specifics within the overall framework of God's direction and/or giving the people confidence and ability to plan ahead by telling them what to expect (cf. **Num. 13:17–20**).

b. (:32) You Will Be Rewarded

“So it will be, if you go with us, it will come about that whatever good the LORD does for us, we will do for you.”

Keddie: This is a lovely intimation of the later universality of the call of the gospel to all nations. Moses did not see the blessing of God as something denied to non-Hebrews on narrowly racial grounds. He did not imagine that Hobab's gain would diminish Israel's share of God's grace.

B. (:33-34) Focusing on the Visible Reminders of the Presence of the Lord that Provided Protection and Guidance During This Three Day Journey

1. (:33) The Ark of the Covenant

“Thus they set out from the mount of the LORD three days' journey, with the ark of the covenant of the LORD journeying in front of them for the three days, to seek out a resting place for them.”

2. (:34) The Cloud of the Lord

“And the cloud of the LORD was over them by day, when they set out from the camp.”

Brown: With these visible signs of God's presence [the ark and the cloud], the pilgrims expressed their confidence in God and their indebtedness to him in two exultant psalms, which heartened the people at the beginning and ending of each stage of the momentous journey.

C. (:35-36) Sounding the Rallying Battle Cry that Invokes God's Dominion

1. (:35) Upon Departure

“Then it came about when the ark set out that Moses said, ‘Rise up, O LORD! And let Thine enemies be scattered, And let those who hate Thee flee before Thee.’”

Iain Duguid: The Israelites also understood that wilderness life is a life of **constant warfare** that can only be won in God's strength. This is evident even in the ordering of the march: the Israelites were arranged by military divisions under their various tribal standards, as if marching out to war (**vv. 12–28**). Leading them from the front on the initial three-day leg of the journey was the ark of the covenant, which represented not only God's throne but his chariot as well (**v. 33**). God was going to be their advance guard in the forthcoming conflict.

As a reminder of the true nature of their wilderness life, every time they broke camp, Moses would say, “*Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you*” (v. 35). “*Arise*” here isn’t just a request to God to get up and get going, as you or I might shout, “Rise and shine” to our children in the morning. The Jewish commentator **Baruch Levine** translates it, “*Attack, O Lord!*” It is a word that is sometimes used in military contexts as a summons to begin the assault (see **Judges 5:12**). Moses is thus invoking the Lord’s warrior presence with them in the conflict with their enemies.

The same theme reemerges in the words that Moses would say whenever the ark came to rest because the cloud had stopped moving: “*Return, O Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel*” (**10:36**). The New Jewish Publication Society translation renders the Hebrew more literally, “*Return, O Lord, you who are Israel’s myriads of thousands.*” When it came to fighting, the Lord himself was the countless thousands of Israel, the decisive contributor to their victories. As long as the Lord was fighting for them, Israel’s victory was assured, no matter how heavily outnumbered the Israelites were by the opposition.

Eugene Merrill: As an indication of the warlike nature of the journey, a foretaste no doubt of the military conquest which lay ahead, Moses would lead the people in a battle cry in which the presence and conquering power of the Lord were invoked (v. 35; cf. **Ps. 68:1**). When the day’s march was over he would entreat the Lord to abide among His people through the night.

2. (:36) Upon Encampment

*“And when it came to rest, he said, ‘Return Thou, O LORD,
To the myriad thousands of Israel.’”*

Harrison: The ancient liturgical nature of the two utterances in this passage has been preserved in the traditional synagogue Torah service, in which the first saying commences, and the second terminates, the worship.

Wenham: The faith which Moses affirms so confidently stands in ironic contrast to what happens in the succeeding chapters: whereas Moses is sure God will do good to Israel, the people begin to complain of the evil (**11:1**) that he is doing them. Moses prays that all God’s enemies will be scattered: the spies declare Israel will be defeated (**chapter 13**). This chapter’s triumphant conclusion deepens the poignant tragedy of the succeeding scenes.

Dennis Cole: The final refrain—“*Return, O Lord, to the myriads of thousands of Israel!*”—bespeaks the magnitude of the forces of Israel as they prepare to launch into the victory march leading to holy war against Canaan. The parallelism of the dual declarations strikingly proclaims that Yahweh God of Israel is not only Lord of the armies of the heavens but also Lord of the innumerable armies of the children of Israel. Together they are an invincible force as long as they act in unity, harmony, purity, and faith.

Just when things look the brightest and most promising, with the Lord leading the people by the cloud of his presence in a glorious march from the mountain where they have encountered him toward a Promised Land of abundance and freedom, the story takes a dramatic turn. The children of Israel have departed Sinai just forty days after taking the census for the military conscription. Less than a month had transpired after having celebrated God's great deliverance in the Exodus from Egypt during the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread and less than a week after the observance of the second month Passover (9:11) for those who had been unclean during the first month celebration. Then suddenly the story veers from victorious march to grievous grumbling and rebellious resistance to God's plan for blessing and fulfillment of promise.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) When have you experienced a good start in a spiritual venture that was quickly followed by defeat and discouragement?
- 2) Do you view the details of obeying God to be burdensome and constricting or to be the pathway to blessing and freedom?
- 3) Was there any sense in which Moses' plea for assistance from Hobab manifested a lack of dependence upon the sufficiency of the guidance provided directly by the Lord?
- 4) What lessons do you learn for today's church from the battle cries sounded by Moses whenever the ark of the covenant set out and whenever it came to rest?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Brown: Meticulous organization was necessary if this massive crowd was to make its way across such inhospitable terrain. It was a hazardous enterprise in itself, without making it more difficult by tribal squabbles about preeminence, petty rivalries about advantageous positions in the column or innate jealousies about traditions and rights, preferences and privileges. People at the front were naturally vulnerable, fearing what might lie ahead. Those at the rear felt equally exposed, dreading the sudden attack of marauding bandits, quick to plunder their possessions. God had told them who must be first in the column, and which tribes should follow and in what sequence. They were to do what he said.

The story also says something about human responsibility. Although God gave the orders, the appointed people must see that his word was obeyed. The tribal leaders, named earlier in Numbers (1:4–16; 2:1–32; 7:10–83), now appear again. For the fourth

time, the same names are mentioned. The identical data emphasize afresh the crucial importance of reliable leadership, the need for the people to respect, support and follow their leaders, and the dependence of the leaders themselves on the guidance of God. They were not '*heads of the clans*' (1:16) by their own appointment. The Lord had assigned these specific responsibilities to them and they in turn must submit themselves totally to his authority.

Ashley: This passage [33-36] functions in a number of ways. First, its initial words (*And they set out, wayyise 'û*) look back to the same words in the summary statement of v. 12 and bring the description of the departure to completion. All the material in vv. 12-32 happened before the actual departure. Second, the passage informs the reader of the change in the position of the ark from within the tribes to a position at their head (cf. 2:17). This shift shows the inadequacy of mere human leadership (even Moses') to bring the people to victory in Canaan. Third, this new position of the ark is shown not to cancel or make unnecessary the presence of the cloud. Here again, the theme of continuity and development is seen. In the previous journey from Egypt to Sinai the people had been led by the cloud of Yahweh.²⁶ The new stage of the journey would have not only the continuity of the old cloud, but also the development of the ark's leadership, symbolizing Yahweh on his throne, to assure the people of divine leadership in the days ahead. Fourth, growing out of what has already been said, the passage sets the leadership of Yahweh and the rebellion of the people in stark contrast. According to Yahweh's will the people would be fortunate and well-off (see 10:29), but almost immediately the people begin to complain about their misfortune (chs. 11-12). Finally, vv. 35-36, although somewhat different in form, function in the same way as Aaron's blessing in 6:22-27, i.e., they conclude a major section of text with a wish for an act of Yahweh on behalf of the people.

Iain Duguid: The third truth that Israel needed to remember on their march is that even though the wilderness life is a **pilgrimage** and a **war**, the goal of the pilgrimage is neither constant traveling nor constant conflict, but **rest in the land God had promised**. The reason the ark went ahead of them on their travels was not simply to protect Israel from dangers and enemies but to find for them "*a resting place*" (v. 33). This was the goal of the whole pilgrimage, to find a place of rest in the land that God had promised to give them.

This loss of perspective is what so often discourages us in life, isn't it? We forget that we are only camping here, only passing through on our way to eternal glory. We start to believe that this world really is all there is, and so we grumble about our accommodations and our food here. The conversation between Moses and Hobab shows us what it means to keep our eyes fixed on the goal. Moses didn't invite Hobab to join him on a miserable trek through the apparently endless wasteland that stretched out before them. No, he invited Hobab to look beyond the wilderness and join Israel in coming to the land where the Lord had promised good things for his people. What is more, when Hobab initially declined, saying that he would rather return home to his own land and his own people, Moses continued to press him, affirming that Israel would share with him whatever good things the Lord gave them (v. 32). In effect, he

invited Hobab to join the spiritual descendants of Abraham, who left his home and his people by faith, seeking a city with foundations that God had promised him.

J. Ligon Duncan: Leaving Sinai

I. Israel's Obedience (:11-28)

First of all, Moses draws attention to the fact that Israel is careful to obey precisely God's directions on what they are to do as they travel. . .

If you're going to walk with the Lord in pilgrimage, if you're going to journey with the Lord, how do you do it? In obedience to His word; in obedience to His directions. You follow the word of God. . .

God's word says that the way of happiness and delight is in the exact opposite direction. It's not in throwing off the constraint of God's word, it's walking in joyful embrace of God's word that joy and satisfaction comes. . .

II. Israel's Assistance (:29-32)

Secondly, in this passage God, through Moses, recruits a Midianite to sort of serve as their 'Tonto to Lone Ranger'. . .

We see how God uses means in our lives. . .

Moses was fully committed to obeying the Lord, but Moses also believed that this Midianite would play a strategically important role in helping the children of Israel, and so he goes out of his way to recruit him. . .

Now one of the things that this reminds us is that walking with the Lord doesn't mean not using common sense. Walking with the Lord doesn't mean not doing due diligence. . .

III. Israel's Trust (:33-36)

Thirdly, in this passage we see the object of Israel's faith visibly depicted in the ark of the covenant and the cloud.

Here we have the description of the ark of the covenant journeying in front of the children of Israel, and the cloud of the Lord leading them by day when they set out from the camp. In other words, Israel's trust in the Lord is visibly depicted by the sight of the ark of the covenant and the cloud. The ark and the cloud are symbols of God's presence with His people, and God's presence with His people is designed to assure them, and their trust is to be placed in Him. And their being able to visibly see these signs of His presence (the ark and the cloud) is designed to stoke their trust, their faith, their confidence in God. All along their trust is not to be in the Midianite guide or in their own obedience, but it's to be focused upon God. And so the ark and the cloud serve as visible manifestations of the object of Israel's faith...the place where Israel's faith is to be focused, which is God. They are a visible depiction of the object of Israel's faith...the fact that Israel needs to trust in God. And so, drawing our attention to this,

Moses is reminding us that walking with the Lord always means trusting God. The battle ultimately belongs to Him, and therefore if we are going to embark upon a dangerous journey, a pilgrimage in the wilderness, we must trust in God.

TEXT: Numbers 11:1-3

TITLE: *GENERAL COMPLAINING ABOUT HARD TIMES*

BIG IDEA:

AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF FAITHFUL PROVIDENTIAL CARE, GOD'S PEOPLE RESPOND TO THE PRESSURE OF ADVERSITY WITH GRUMBLING AND COMPLAINING THAT BRING SEVERE DISCIPLINE

INTRODUCTION:

This more general introduction to the repeated theme of grumbling and complaining marks the beginning of the second main section of the book of Numbers. The tone has dramatically switched from that of preparation to triumphantly embark on the march to conquest the Promised Land to that of immature and rebellious reaction to difficult days on the journey. The severe reaction of the Lord highlights the significance of the sin of grumbling and complaining.

Brueggemann: So far in Numbers we have seen nothing but expressions of agreement with God's direction, obedience, and a high sense of expectancy. But the first three verses of chapter 11 introduce elements that were to become regular features of the subsequent wilderness experience:

- (1) complaint (11:4–5; 12:1–2; 14:1–4; 16:1–3, 41; 20:3–5; 21:5);
- (2) divine punishment (11:33; 12:9–10; 14:20–37; 16:32, 45–49; 17:10–13; 21:6);
- (3) Moses's intercession, which brings a measure of relief (11:2; 12:13; 16:22, 46–49; 21:7); and
- (4) memorializing the incident by giving a name to the site (11:34; 20:13; cf. Exod 15:23; 17:7).

Complaints had been tolerated earlier (Exod 15:24; 16:2; 17:3), but henceforth God would judge it (11:4, 19, 33; 14:2; 16:3; 20:3; 21:5), and that would require Moses's intercession. First, the people grumbled about general conditions (11:1–3), then troublemakers carped about their reliable—and therefore repetitious—diet of manna (11:4–9). Moses chimed in, moaning about his impossible responsibilities (11:10–15). Miriam and Aaron protested Moses's prophetic leadership (12:1–16). Sniveling reached an unforgivable crescendo when the people rejected not only their daily provisions but even their very salvation in the Promised Land (14:1–4). It continued with Korah's anarchy (ch 16).

Dennis Cole: The initial rebellious incident cited in the text sets the stage and pattern for the successive acts of sedition. As noted previously, this method of introducing a section with a **formative case** is typical of the Book of Numbers and other Pentateuchal texts. . .

In the Book of Numbers this action constitutes a shift in the structural and theological movement of the book from one of unity, faithfulness, holiness, and celebration to one of discord, rebellion, and dissatisfaction with who they were as the people of the covenant. The text translates literally “and so the people became like those murmuring evil in the ears of Yahweh.” God had promised goodness and blessing; the people responded with rebellious complaints.

David Guzik: Israel, having been ordered, organized, cleansed, separated, blessed, taught how to give, reminded of God’s deliverance, given God’s presence, and the tools to advance to the Promised Land, is now on the march to Canaan—and immediately, the people complained. How can it be that a nation so blessed can still complain? God had done so much in and for Israel; yet they still murmur against Him. Of course, their circumstances were not easy—but what sin it is for them to complain against God, wiping out the spirit of gratitude in their hearts!

Ronald Allen: There is a cyclical nature to Israel’s rebellions against God; obdurate people tend to repeat the sins of the past. . . . The narrator of Numbers has arranged his materials so carefully that this sudden outbreak of renewed pettiness against God seems unprecedented, unexpected – unbelievable. How, we wonder, with all the preparation for a holy walk, could there come such stumbling so soon?

I. (:1a) GOD HEARS OUR COMPLAINING WHEN WE FAIL THE TEST OF ADVERSITY

“Now the people became like those who complain of adversity in the hearing of the LORD;”

Due to sin, mankind is quick to respond to difficulty with unbelief and an unthankful heart and rebellion.

A. Adversity Will Come as a Test from the Lord – Expect Hard Times

Gordon Wenham: Leaving the relative fertility of the area around Mount Sinai, the Israelites soon found themselves in the most inhospitable desert of Et-Tih, and they began to complain. A modern traveler would sympathize. But the biblical writers did not (cf. **Deut. 9:22; Ps. 78:17ff.**). For them the complaints of Israel were proof of national rebelliousness and unbelief.

Raymond Brown: They whined first about the everyday hardships of their desert journey. It was exactly the same when they left Egypt a year earlier. They had been on the desert highway for only three days when they began moaning about their troubles. All of them had suffered immense hardships in Egypt, and a few days’ discomfort in the blazing sun could hardly be compared with the 400 years of agony they and their people had suffered under cruel oppressors. Surely they did not imagine that the journey would be effortless! Everything in life that is worth anything demands training, discipline, struggle and sacrifice. Little of value is achieved without pain.

Believers, of all people, must expect some element of costliness in the Christian life. All the main characters of the Bible had to cope with adversities of one kind or another.

If only those Israelites could have seen that those tough days in the bleak desert were God's training days, encouraging them to believe that, having delivered them from their Egyptian captors, he would go on to deliver them from their malevolent moods, ungrateful attitudes and churlish dissatisfaction!

The pilgrims never forgot the place where they whined about their difficulties. The scene of complaint became the arena of judgment. Unchecked fire (perhaps the result of lightning) was a terrifying prospect for a camping community. Reflecting on the event later, they called the place Taberah ('burning'), because fire from the LORD had burned among them (3). But they did not learn from the grim lessons of experience.

Eugene Merrill: The reference to His hearing them is anthropomorphic language used, no doubt, to suggest that their complaining was not inward and quiet. Indeed, it was so loud it reached the very heavens!

Harrison: Quite probably the people were fatigued after their experience of marching for three days. The euphoria of the Sinai experience was now being put to practical test, and the Israelites discovered, like many saints since that time, that the "mountain-top" experience is not infrequently followed by a sojourn in an emotional and spiritual "valley." Their complaints are not specified in the MT, but the fact that they even indulged in such ungrateful behavior shows how superficial was their thankfulness to God for His mighty deliverance from Egypt, and how little was their faith in Him as provider and in Moses as His appointed leader.

B. Complaining Dishonors the Character of God – Choose Contentment

1. His Covenant Love and Compassion
2. His Faithfulness and Providential Care

J. Ligon Duncan: Whenever we complain of our circumstances, we are denying God's providence over us.

2. His Justice and Fair Treatment
3. His Wisdom and Divine Plan for Our Lives

David Thompson: It is interesting that the only other place this word is used is in **Lamentations 3:39**. In **Lamentations 3:39** the meaning is why should a man complain about anything in view of all of his sins.

Gordon Keddie: "A murmuring spirit," said **Jeremiah Burroughs**, "is the evil of the evil and the misery of the misery." What the great English Puritan meant was that, however

grievous the affliction which has come upon us might be, a “murmuring heart within . . . is more grievous.” Why more grievous? Because it denies the attitude of faith, trust, gratitude and dependence upon the Lord which ought to characterize the Christian. It therefore brings to any problem, real or imagined, a disposition to be frustrated, angry, bitter, fault-finding and recriminating, with the inevitable result that far from being resolved, the difficulty becomes further fuel for the fires of discontent in that person’s innermost being. It is the antithesis of the peace that God gives to his people, the denial of the grace-filled lordship of Christ over all of our life and withdrawal from the healing power of gospel grace.

C. Complaining (in Heart or Tongue) is Never Hidden from the Lord

II. (:1b) GOD HATES OUR COMPLAINING AND RESPONDS IN ANGER

A. Divine Response of Anger

“and when the LORD heard it, His anger was kindled,”

Greg Allen: And as we see from these first few verses, God heard the complaints of His people. They may have thought that they could complain and ‘humph!’ outside of God’s earshot; but He heard every grumble. And we also see that it displeased Him. It aroused His anger. Each time they had complained in the past, He had answered their complaints graciously. And each time He answered, they should have learned the lesson. And now, with each new complaint that He hears from them, He grows increasingly angry with them.

Robert Rayburn: Why is grumbling so serious a sin, so deadly a sin? Because it is the evidence of unbelief. We are going to discover that the largest part of the nation of Israel was in fact an unbelieving people. That will become dimly clear in the next few chapters of Numbers. But already the handwriting is on the wall. Already the evidence is mounting that Israel does not have a living confidence in the Lord, does not love him, does not trust him to fulfill the promises he made to her, and is not willing to keep his commandments in the confidence that his commandments are good and right and in the confidence that their happiness lies in submission to the Lord. And the evidence of that, the proof of that is her readiness to grumble and to complain. Grumbling is a form of unbelief and the act of an unbeliever. It is nothing less, as we read in v. 20 than rejecting God! *That* is what makes it so serious and why God judges it so severely.

B. Discipline of Consuming Fire

*“and the fire of the LORD burned among them
and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.”*

Iain Duguid: The grumbling started with “the rabble,” the riff-raff (*hāsapsup*), who lived on the fringe of the camp (v. 4). This is the mixed multitude of all nationalities who came out of Egypt with God’s people but had never fully assimilated and taken on

Israel's values and standards. The grumbling then spread from the riff-raff to infect the rest of the Israelites (v. 4).

Timothy Ashley: Fire is a common biblical image for God's presence, as at the burning bush (**Exod. 3:2**) or at Mt. Sinai (**19:18**), and especially common as an image for God's judgment. A further contrast here is between the fire of God used for divine guidance (as in the fiery pillar, e.g., **Num. 9:15–16**) and the fire of God used for judgment, as here. Since the fire led to the naming of the place as "*the burning place*" (Taberah), and since the fire is said to have consumed part of the camp, it is better to take this judgment as literal fire rather than as a metaphor for some other divine punishment.

Dennis Cole: The Lord was merciful in sending his purging fire only to the perimeter of the Israelite camp. Many could have been consumed had the judgment been meted out in the midst of the encampment. The outskirts of the camp were where uncleanness and ceremonial impurity were relegated. A judgment of fire from the Lord often comes by means of lightning, though the mode of igniting the fire is not specified. This form of judgment parallels that meted out against Nadab and Abihu (**Lev 10:1–3**), though that fire came out from the midst of the tabernacle.

III. (:2) GOD HALTS HIS DISCIPLINE WHEN INTERCESSION IS EFFECTUAL

A. Appeal to the Mediator

"The people therefore cried out to Moses,"

B. Effectual Intercession

"and Moses prayed to the LORD,"

Iain Duguid: This cameo scene shows us that what is at stake in this chapter is not just the sin of grumbling. It is also the role of Moses as a prophet. An important part of the work of a prophet in Old Testament times was to intercede for the people. On the day when the Lord's judgment was about to be poured out on his people, it was the prophet's calling to stand between the people and their God, averting God's wrath by intercessory prayer. This was hard and dangerous work, a task compared to standing in the breached wall of a besieged city, the most dangerous position in an assault (see **Ezekiel 13:5; 22:30**). Yet without faithful prophets, the people's future would be bleak indeed. As the archetypal prophet, the pattern after whom all other prophets were framed (see Deuteronomy 18:15), Moses had both the ability and obligation to approach God and intercede for the people. This is exactly what he did at Taberah.

C. Divine Relief

"and the fire died out."

Ronald Allen: In the midst of his wrath, the Lord remembers mercy. This is one of the ongoing themes of Scripture and is a particular truism in the Book of Numbers. The people truly deserve God's considerable wrath. But the survivors of this outburst of his

anger cry out to Moses for help in their behalf before the Lord. Moses prays, and the fire subsides. The Hebrew verb is *saqa*, a word meaning “to sink down,” a particularly picturesque term for the dying out of a raging fire. . .

Chapters 11–20 present a dismal record of their acts of ingratitude and of God’s consequent judgments on his ungrateful people. Yet within these chapters are innumerable instances of his continuing grace. The reader of these texts goes astray if he or she focuses solely on God’s wrath or on the constant provocations to his anger by his meandering people. The more impressive feature in this text is God’s continuing mercy against continuing, obdurate rebellion

(:3) EPILOGUE -- REMEMBER THE CONSEQUENCES OF COMPLAINING

*“So the name of that place was called Taberah,
because the fire of the LORD burned among them.”*

Complaining is not some minor, insignificant sin

Look at the cycle of sin and deliverance presented in the Book of Judges – without some type of memorial, it is too easy to forget past failures and repeat the same type of sin that leads to severe judgment.

Dennis Cole: The place was memorialized as *Taberah* (“burning” or “it [the fire] burns”) because the fire of Yahweh had burned the outskirts of the camp in judgment against his people. The site is mentioned again only in **Deut 9:22**, in the context of Moses’ recounting the history of Israel’s unfaithfulness in a challenge to the people to fear the Lord and to obey, serve, and love him (**Deut 10:12–13**). *Taberah* is omitted in the journey itinerary of **Numbers 33:16–17**, perhaps being subsumed under the heading of *Kibroth Hattaavah* in the subsequent context.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How is our lack of contentment a reflection of our failure to appreciate the sufficiency of the very person of Jesus Christ and our relationship with Him?
- 2) How do you tend to respond to hard times?
- 3) Do we tend to catch the contagion of complaining from others or halt its advance by urging others to meditate upon the attributes of God?
- 4) Do we remember the adverse consequences of previous episodes of murmuring and complaining in our own experience?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Chiastic Structure:

1a) Num 11:1-3, It displeased YHVH when the people complained;

1b) Num 11:4-15, The people yielded to an intense craving for meat;

1c) Num 11:16-17, Choose 70 elders of the people upon whom I may put My Spirit;

1d) Num 11:18, YHVH will give Israel meat and they shall eat;

1e) Num 11:19-20a, Israel shall eat meat for a whole month;

Central Axis -- Num 11:20b, Israel has despised YHVH who is among them;

2e) Num 11:21-22, Where can meat come from to provide for Israel for a whole month?

2d) Num 11:23, Israel shall see whether YHVH's Word will happen to them or not;

2c) Num 11:24-30, 70 elders of Israel receive the Spirit of YHVH and prophesy;

2b) Num 11:31-35, YHVH provided quail;

2a) Num 12:1-16, it displeased YHVH when Miriam + Aaron complained.

<https://www.alittleperspective.com/numbers-11-and-12/>

Iain Duguid: Grumbling never gets much attention as a problem. Grumbling is not one of the traditional seven deadly sins. In fact, it probably wouldn't make it onto the list even if the list were expanded to include the fifty deadly sins. Nobody ever goes to see a counselor and says, "Help me! I'm addicted to grumbling." There are no meetings of Grumblers Anonymous or twelve-step programs designed to cure the condition. This is certainly not because of a lack of people who suffer from the problem. Which of us has never grumbled about something in this life? We grumble about our politicians and car mechanics, our jobs and our homes, our spouses and children.

Perhaps we assume that since we all do it so often, grumbling can't really be so bad. It is virtually our national pastime, so engrained that it has even been described as a "God-

given right.” **Only rarely is grumbling recognized in its true seriousness.** In this study we will see the power of grumbling, the deadly consequences of grumbling, and God’s true remedy for grumbling. Grumbling is here exposed in all of its destructiveness; yet the good news of the Bible is that grumbling’s complaint will not be the last word.

Dr. Justin Imel, Sr.: Application

How do we stop complaining and grumbling?

Here are some steps:

Sometimes we complain about things we cannot control.

Do you ever complain about other people? Boss, spouse, coworkers, drivers, etc. There is nothing you can do to change their behavior. Yet, you can change the way you **respond.**

Instead of the negative energy of grumbling and complaining, we seek to bless. Moving from cursing to blessing is biblical. *“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you” (Prov 25:21-22).* *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:21).* What good can you do this week for people who cause you to complain?

Do you complain about other things outside of your control? The weather, the government, what you have to eat, etc.?

We need to remember that God is ultimately in control: *“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns” (Rev 19:6).* We can pray to Him: *“Casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:7).*

We can remember the multitude of blessings God gives:

God *“did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17).*

“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Cor 16:2).

To keep from grumbling, we each need to make a list of the great blessings God has given us. Be specific. Put it in a place where you can see it often—fridge, bathroom mirror, etc. When you’re tempted to complain, go to that list and have a reminder of all that God has done.

Sometimes we complain because we need to change our behavior.

How many times do we complain about things that are our own fault? Do you complain because your spouse is often short with you? Is your spouse short tempered because of your behavior? Would you feel better about yourself and not complain so much if you

changed behavior, changed attitude?

Examine your life to see what needs to be changed and work at changing it! “*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves*” (2 Cor 13:5). Is there some behavior you need to change?

We absolutely must get rid of complaining and grumbling. In our text, the Jews were severely judged for complaining and grumbling. God still judges complainers. “*Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door*” (Js 5:9). Jude writes about the ungodly against whom the Lord comes to execute judgment. Jude says: “*These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage*” (Jude 16). Will God execute judgment on you because you are a complainer?

Charles Swindoll:

Attitude

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts.

It is more important than the past,

than education, than money,

than circumstances, than failures, than successes,

than what other people think, say, or do.

It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill.

It will make or break a company...a church...a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice

every day regarding the attitude

we embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past...

we cannot change the fact that people

will act in a certain way.

We cannot change the inevitable.

The only thing we can do is play the one string we have,

and that is our attitude ...

I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me

and 90% how I react to it.

And so it is with you ... we are in charge of our Attitudes.

TEXT: Numbers 11:4-23

TITLE: DEALING WITH COMPLAINING PEOPLE AND FRUSTRATION IN MINISTRY

BIG IDEA:

CONFIDENCE IN THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD'S POWER TO MEET NEEDS IS THE ANTIDOTE TO ALL COMPLAINING AND TO FRUSTRATION IN LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION:

Moses certainly had a high degree of certainty regarding God's call for him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to the Promised Land. God had revealed Himself in the burning bush incident and then repeatedly confirmed the calling of Moses. The Providential care of the Lord had been manifested in numerous ways. Yet when faced with adversity in the wilderness and the entire company of people complaining over their lot in life, Moses quickly became frustrated as a leader and suffered a real ministry crisis.

Terence Fretheim: This wilderness setting presents problems and possibilities for shaping a community identity for the newly redeemed people of God. The period of wandering is a necessary buffer between liberation and landedness for the sake of forming this identity. Such a process does not unfold easily for Israel or for God. The people have been taken out of Egypt, but it proves difficult to take Egypt out of the people. The familiar orderliness of Egypt seems preferable to the insecurities of life lived from one oasis to the next. . . These verses interweave concerns about food and Moses' leadership. . .

In response to God's anger (11:10) and in language typical of lament psalms, Moses complains that, given what the people have become, God has mistreated him. God has placed too heavy a leadership burden on him (see **Exodus 18:18**), and provided insufficient resources. Moses uses striking maternal imagery for God: God has conceived and birthed this people (see **Deuteronomy 32:18; Isaiah 42:14; 66:13**) and hence God should assume the responsibilities of a wet nurse and see to the people's nourishment. Moses should not have to carry this burden alone, implying that God is negligent. Feeling caught in the middle, Moses asks for either relief or death.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-26-2/commentary-on-numbers-114-6-10-16-24-29>

I. (:4-9) COMPLAINT OF THE PEOPLE REGARDING THE BORING DIET OF MANNA

A. (:4) Contagious Spirit of Discontent – Give Us Meat to Eat

1. Grumbling Begins with the Craving of the Foreign Malcontents

“And the rabble who were among them had greedy desires;”

Dennis Cole: The second rebellion was instigated by an assembly (*hā`sapsūp*) of those who had departed from Egypt along with the Israelites, and the discontent spread rapidly through the camp of the children of Israel. The initial term used to describe this mutinous group is a *hapax legomenon* built on the verb *’āśap*, “to gather.” This faction seems to be distinguished in the text from the Israelites. The group’s offense is described as an intense craving (lit. “*they were craving a craving*”) for meat and other produce that they had eaten in Egypt. In the midst of their austerity in the desert setting, they had become nostalgic over their former food supply while forgetting the bondage and oppression from which the Lord had so dramatically delivered them. The failure to remember God’s grace and faithfulness was the second aspect of their rebellion.

2. Grumbling Extends to the Forgetful Covenant Company of the Redeemed
*“and also the sons of Israel wept again and said,
‘Who will give us meat to eat?’”*

B. (:5-6) Perverted Attitude of Ingratitude – We Used to be Better Off

1. (:5) Distorted Memory of the Good Old Days
“We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic,”

Guzik: Israel here is engaging in “creative memory,” choosing to remember certain things about Egypt, and exaggerating those things, while at the same time choosing to forget other things.

2. (:6) Disinterested Perspective Towards God’s Gracious Provision
*“but now our appetite is gone.
There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.”*

Brueggemann: Loathing manna meant turning up their nose at God’s provision, and longing for Egypt meant abandoning God’s deliverance. They were effectively repudiating the very basis of their covenant relation with God. They were showing signs of the same spirit that rejected the true bread from heaven, Jesus Christ, who gives eternal life (**John 6:32–58**).

David McCasland: Many of our recurring complaints focus not on what we don't have, but on what we do have and find uninteresting. Whether it's our work, our church, our house, or our spouse, boredom grumbles that it's not what we want or need. This frustration with sameness has been true of the human spirit since the beginning. Notice the protest of God's people about their menu in the wilderness. Recalling the variety of food they ate as slaves in Egypt, they despised the monotony of God's current provision: "*Our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!*" (**Numbers 11:6**).

God provided exactly what they needed each day, but they wanted something more exciting. Are we tempted to do the same? **Oswald Chambers** said: "Drudgery is the

touchstone of character. There are times when there is no illumination and no thrill, but just the daily round, the common task. Routine is God's way of saving us between our times of inspiration. Do not expect God always to give you His thrilling minutes, but learn to live in the domain of drudgery by the power of God."

During the boring times of life, God is working to instill His character in us. Drudgery is our opportunity to experience the presence of the Lord.

C. (:7-9) Reminder of God's Gracious Provision of Manna

1. (:7) Distinctive Nature

"Now the manna was like coriander seed, and its appearance like that of bdellium."

MacArthur: This refers more to appearance than color, i.e. it had the appearance of a pale resin.

2. (:8a) Disciplined Routine of Gathering and Preparation

"The people would go about and gather it and grind it between two millstones or beat it in the mortar, and boil it in the pot and make cakes with it;"

3. (:8b) Delightful Taste

"and its taste was as the taste of cakes baked with oil."

4. (:9) Daily Distribution

"And when the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall with it."

II. (:10-15) COMPLAINT OF MOSES REGARDING THE FRUSTRATION OF LEADERSHIP

A. (:10) Burnout of Moses – Exasperated by the Response of Both the People and the Lord

1. Exasperated by the Response of the People

"Now Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, each man at the doorway of his tent;"

Harrison: Moses was already feeling the pressures of leadership over a people whose faith was melting away at the first sign of difficulty. The complaining and wailing of the people brought him into the Lord's presence in the Tent of Meeting.

2. Exasperated by the Response of the Lord

"and the anger of the LORD was kindled greatly, and Moses was displeased."

Roy Gane: As expected, the divine King does not take kindly to insulting rejection of the heavenly bounty that he has daily provided. Ominously, he becomes “*exceedingly angry*” (11:10). Exacerbating the gravity of the situation is Moses’ burnout. Whereas he interceded at Taberah with a prayer to God (11:2), he now offers a complaint of his own (11:11–15). Just as the people are sick and tired of manna, Moses is sick and tired of them!

B. (:11) Gripe of Moses – I Deserve Better Treatment

1. You are Being Too Hard on Me

*“So Moses said to the LORD,
‘Why hast Thou been so hard on Thy servant?’”*

Brueggemann: He didn’t reproach God for treating the people shabbily; rather, the one whom we come to know as the intercessor par excellence complained on his own behalf. He probably brooded some on his reluctance to take the job in the first place (Exod 3:1–4:17), then descended to sarcastic questions. . .

Guzik: **Why have You afflicted Your servant?** Moses responded to God the way many of us do in a time of trial. He essentially said, “God, here I am serving You. Why did You bring this upon me?” It’s easy to say God did not bring this upon Moses—a carnal and ungrateful people did. Yet, though God did not directly afflict Moses with this, He ultimately allowed it.. God allowed this for the same reason God allows any affliction in our lives—to compel us to trust in Him all the more, to partner with Him in overcoming obstacles, and to love and praise Him all the more through our increased dependence on Him and the greater deliverance He brings.. That no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this (1 **Thessalonians 3:3**). Of course, it is very hard to see this in the midst of the affliction; we feel like Moses did: *Why have I not found favor in Your sight?* “If You really loved me LORD, why would You bring all this upon me?” God’s response is ever the same: “It’s because I do love you that I am training you, building you up in faith.”

2. You are Not Giving Me Enough Credit

*“And why have I not found favor in Thy sight,
that Thou hast laid the burden of all this people on me?”*

C. (:12) Blame Shifting of Moses

1. I Didn’t Create This Situation

“Was it I who conceived all this people?”

2. I Didn’t Lead Us to This Point

*“Was it I who brought them forth, that Thou shouldest say to me,
‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant,
to the land which Thou didst swear to their fathers’?”*

Dennis Cole: The widespread nature of the discontent is highlighted by the phrase “*every family wailing*,” as the initial grumbling of the rabble spread like wildfire

through the camp. Moses is incensed at the people for making his role as a leader an unbearable one and toward Yahweh for assigning him this overwhelming burden of leadership. His reaction is pointed primarily toward God, challenging the divine decision to place him in the parental role of providing for this nation. It was not he who gave birth to the nation, and hence it was not he who bore the responsibility for their welfare.

D. (:13-14) Inadequacy of Moses

1. (:13) Inadequate to Meet the Needs of the People = Provide the Requested Meat

*“Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?
For they weep before me, saying, ‘Give us meat that we may eat!’”*

2. (:14) Inadequate to Bear the Burden of Leadership

*“I alone am not able to carry all this people,
because it is too burdensome for me.”*

Timothy Ashley: As the following verses indicate, however, Moses does not react against the people’s rejection of God’s provision but against the people for making his job as leader more difficult, and against Yahweh for giving him the task as leader.

E. (:15) Depression and Despair of Moses

*“So if Thou art going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once,
if I have found favor in Thy sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness.”*

Wenham: In a long and angry prayer he vents his frustrations before God. Israel is like a little child. It is really hard work being nursemaid to him all day. It would be better to die than have to look after them alone (**11–15**; cf. **Exod. 33:15**; **Rom. 9:3**).

Dennis Cole: Moses’ despair concerning his life’s lot parallels those of other notables in Israel’s history. Job cursed the very day of his birth in the midst of his season of suffering, and Jeremiah likewise bemoaned his conception and birth in the midst of the shame he experienced in being beaten and imprisoned by Pashhur in Jerusalem.⁴² At this point in his leadership ministry, Moses faced a crisis of faith and dependency, preferring death as a favor from God rather than continue to have the responsibility of directing such a rebellious rabble. The Lord responds with grace and yet also with judgment. Moses would get some relief, but in the long run this was just the beginning of troublesome years to come.

III. (:16-20) RESPONSE OF THE LORD

A. (:16-17) Response to the Burdensome Nature of Leadership = Mercy of Shared Leadership

1. (:16) Delegating Additional Leaders

“The LORD therefore said to Moses, ‘Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and

their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.”

2. (:17) Empowering Additional Leaders

“Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you shall not bear it all alone.”

B. (:18-20) Response to the Demand for Meat = Grace of Provision Ending in Curse of Excess

1. (:18a) Serious Confrontation – Be Careful How You Approach the Lord

“And say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat;’”

Brueggemann: Then God turned to the people’s complaint about food. He commanded the people to “purify” themselves in preparation for the meat they sought (**11:18**), indicating that “tomorrow” was going to be about something more than the merely mundane matter of diet. The people might have thought they were about to experience straightforward blessing, but ominous talk of griping and gagging undercut that. The people didn’t like manna every day; therefore, God was going to force meat on them day after day, until they gagged on it.

2. (:18b) Ungrateful and Perverted Complaint

“for you have wept in the ears of the LORD, saying, ‘Oh that someone would give us meat to eat! For we were well-off in Egypt.’”

3. (:18c-20a) Excessive Provision = Essentially Turning a Blessing Into Discipline

a. (:18c) Promise of Provision of Meat

“Therefore the LORD will give you meat and you shall eat.”

b. (:19-20a) Extended Duration of the Provision

“You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, 20 but a whole month,”

c. (:20b) Unpleasant Result of the Provision

“until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you;”

Dennis Cole: The contrast between the true source of blessing is heightened further when the people ascribe “goodness” to their situation in Egypt. When the people were preparing to leave Sinai, Moses told Hobab that God had promised good things to Israel. God was Israel’s true source of goodness, but now they claimed things were better for them in Egypt (lit., “*For goodness is for us in Egypt*”). To attribute goodness to the land of bondage, oppression, and despair was blasphemous, evidence of their

brazen rebellion against God; they had rejected his goodness. Now he would turn that which was formerly a means of great blessing, the abundant provision of quail for their meat supply, into a means of cursing and plague. The supply from God would be far more than abundant, lasting for a whole month. The pattern in the dialogue comes to a dramatic climax in the intensifying sixfold enumeration of the supply period for the quail—not one, two, five, ten, or even twenty days, but for an entire month (over twenty-nine days) they would experience the oxymoronic fullness of God’s wrathful blessing. The savory meat they so lusted after would become loathsome to them. The nature of the punishment would echo their rejection of God.

4. (:20c) Key Point of Failure = Not Trusting the Providential Care of the Lord
“because you have rejected the LORD who is among you and have wept before Him, saying, ‘Why did we ever leave Egypt?’”

Ronald Allen: The issue was not just failure to demonstrate proper gratitude to the Lord who was in their midst and who was their constant source of good; it was turning from him entirely and grudgingly rejecting his many acts of mercy on their behalf. I suspect the only comparable thing for the modern reader would be for one who has made a Christian commitment to say to the Savior, “I wish you had not died for me! Leave me alone!” Only when we put things in these terms may we sense the enormity of the language of this verse.

IV. (:21-23) KEY ISSUE = THE SUFFICIENCY OF GOD’S POWER TO MEET ALL NEEDS IN ACCORDANCE WITH HIS PROMISE

A. (:21-22) Questioning the Lord’s Capability to Meet the Need

1. (:21) God’s Claim of Sufficiency is Difficult to Believe When the Needs are Enormous

a. Enormous Needs

“But Moses said, ‘The people, among whom I am, are 600,000 on foot;”

b. Unbelievable Claim of Sufficiency

“yet Thou hast said, I will give them meat in order that they may eat for a whole month.”

2. (:22) Apart from Faith, Sufficient Resources Are Not Visible

a. Not Enough Animals to Feed the People

*“Should flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to be **sufficient** for them?”*

b. Not Enough Fish to Feed the People

*“Or should all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to be **sufficient** for them?”*

B. (:23) Confidence in the Lord's Power to Meet the Need

1. The Lord is Up to the Challenge

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Is the LORD's power limited?’”

Dennis Cole: In his dolor and disbelief Moses had challenged God's ability to meet the needs of the people in the wilderness. He had questioned God's essential beneficent nature. But the Lord responds quickly and succinctly to the disputation with a rhetorical question, *“Is the hand of the Lord shortened?”* Has somehow the right hand and arm of Yahweh, which delivered the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt and brought them through the sea on dry ground, been reduced in power and capacity? Absolutely not! So now the reluctant Moses and the recalcitrant people were about to experience once more the magnitude of God's power of blessing and the veracity of his promise to supply the needs of his people. In spite of the numerous life illustrations the Israelites and the assembly had experienced, they had not yet come to the realization of the promise the apostle Paul later echoed in **Phil 4:19**, *“My God will supply all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”*

2. The Lord Always Keeps His Promises

“Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not.”

Timothy Ashley: The word hand (*yāḏ*) is used many times in the OT as an anthropomorphism for God's strength. The use of the verb *“to cut off”* (*qāṣar*) with *“hand”* (*yāḏ*) indicates impotence in God (e.g., **Isa. 50:2; 59:1**) or in humankind (**2 K. 19:26; Isa. 37:27**). The proof of the true God is whether his word comes to pass (cf., e.g., **Isa. 41:21–29; 46:8–11**). Here God simply says, Now you will see whether my word happens to you or not. In the present context this word of Yahweh applies not only to feeding the multitude, but also to appointing elders to share the leadership.

Robert Hawker: God had made a positive promise to Moses that for the space of a whole month he would feed the vast host in the wilderness with flesh. Moses, being overtaken by a fit of unbelief, looks to the outward means, and is at a loss to know how the promise can be fulfilled. He looked to the creature instead of the Creator. But doth the Creator expect the creature to fulfil his promise for him? No; he who makes the promise ever fulfils it by his own unaided omnipotence. If he speaks, it is done—done by himself. His promises do not depend for their fulfilment upon the co-operation of the puny strength of man. We can at once perceive the mistake which Moses made. And yet how commonly we do the same! God has promised to supply our needs, and we look to the creature to do what God has promised to do; and then, because we perceive the creature to be weak and feeble, we indulge in unbelief. Why look we to that quarter at all? Will you look to the north pole to gather fruits ripened in the sun? Verily, you would act no more foolishly if ye did this than when you look to the weak for strength, and to the creature to do the Creator's work. Let us, then, put the question on the right footing. The ground of faith is not the sufficiency of the visible means for the performance of the promise, but the all-sufficiency of the invisible God, who will most surely do as he hath said. If after clearly seeing that the onus lies with the Lord and not with the creature, we dare to indulge in mistrust, the question of God comes home

mightily to us: “Has the Lord’s hand waxed short?” May it happen, too, in his mercy, that with the question there may flash upon our souls that blessed declaration, “*Thou shalt see now whether my word shall come to pass unto thee or not.*”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Since we know that complaining is extremely contagious, how can we maintain a spirit of thanksgiving and contentment in our local church?
- 2) What is the typical fallacy in the tendency to long for the good old days?
- 3) How does the Lord remind us of His all sufficient power to provide for all of our needs?
- 4) How can spiritual leaders guard against depression, despair and burnout in ministry?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Raymond Brown: First, example is important. The trouble started with unworthy people who were a bad example to their fellow travelers. That word rabble (4) is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament; it may describe those non-Israelites who had left Egypt with them.⁶ The sick complaints should have died on their lips, but how quickly other people took up their resentments and made them their own!

Secondly, sin is contagious. Before long, this complaining spirit spread throughout the camp: Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent (10).

Thirdly, memory is selective. Their minds went back to those delicious meals provided by their ruthless masters in distant Egypt, but how rapidly they forgot the intense hardship, the long nights of sorrow, the merciless killing of innocent children, the vicious whipping by heartless rulers! It is the easiest thing to look back on a distant scene with pleasure, forgetting that earlier days had difficult moments too.

Fourthly, diet is preoccupying. God had provided generously for them ever since that vast crowd had left their Egyptian captivity. Not for one single day had they lacked anything they needed—food, drink, clothing, shelter, protection, security and hope — and yet here they were, wistfully recalling the superior meals of days gone by. . .

Finally, contentment is attractive. If only these disgruntled travelers had expressed their gratitude for the daily manna instead of dwelling unprofitably on their Egyptian

banquets! Confined to a Roman dungeon, the apostle Paul told his friends at Philippi that ‘*whatever the circumstances*’, he had learnt the lesson of contentment: ‘*whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want*’.⁹ Hunger was part of life’s everyday coinage; he had ‘*often gone without food*’.¹⁰ Towards the close of his life he told a young colleague that ‘*godliness with contentment*’ was of inestimable worth: ‘*But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.*’¹¹ The apostle’s experience is captured in the song of Bunyan’s shepherd boy:

I am content with what I have,
Little be it or much:
And, Lord, contentment still I crave
Because thou savest such.
Fulness to such a burden is
That go on Pilgrimage:
Here little, and hereafter Bliss,
Is best from Age to Age.

Iain Duguid: Their complaint exposes a pair of important lessons about the sin of grumbling. In the first place, grumbling is extremely **contagious**. It is an infectious disease that is easily passed from one person to the next. It typically originates among those with little or no spiritual insight, but it can easily be passed on from them to the whole community and draw in those who ought to know better. This is true in our setting just as much as it was for them. Grumbling is a sin you can catch from others, which means that you need to be careful who you spend your time with and how you spend your time with them. I’m certainly not suggesting that you should cut yourself off from everyone who lacks spiritual maturity, but in such relationships you should certainly be aware of who is influencing whom. . .

The reason why grumbling typically starts with those who have little or no spiritual insight, those on the edge of the community, is because the root of grumbling is **unbelief**. The vision of the grumblers was fatally flawed. Their perspective on both the past and the present was distorted. The past suddenly became a golden age in which everything had been wonderful: “Egypt! The old country! That glorious place of fish suppers and great salads! How green was the grass in the Nile valley!” Now one might well ask, “If it was really such a wonderful place, why were they so eager to leave it? What about the harsh taskmasters of Egypt, the endless making of bricks without straw?” (**Exodus 5:6–21**). Their memory of the past had become strangely forgetful, developing strategic holes.

Not only was their memory of the past selective and flawed, so was their perspective on the present. We might paraphrase their grumbling like this: “If I see one more piece of manna, I think I’m going to be sick. Manna, manna, manna—that’s all we ever eat anymore. Manna is boring, unattractive, and tasteless. We want some other kind of food.” That was their skewed perspective on God’s provision, and lest we be deceived into having some sympathy for them, the narrator takes the time to challenge each of their assertions in turn.

First, he points out the fact that the manna was not unattractive; on the contrary, it looked like bdellium (v. 7), a prized substance that was one of the products of the area immediately surrounding the Garden of Eden (**Genesis 2:12**). The Israelites didn't have to pay for the manna either: it came down free every night, along with the dew (v. 9). Nor was it boring: it could be prepared in a variety of tasty ways—ground or boiled or baked (v. 8). Given the opportunity, an ancient cooking magazine could surely have produced an issue entitled “365 Ways to Cook Manna!” Finally, far from being tasteless, it was extremely appetizing (v. 8). The NIV's description, “like something made with olive oil,” or even that in the ESY, “the taste of cakes baked with oil,” doesn't sound nearly as mouth-watering as it should. Much better is the translation, “it tasted like a pastry cooked with the finest oil” (HESB). It may have looked somewhat like porridge, but it actually tasted more like the most delicious donuts. It was indeed “*the bread of heaven*,” as **Psalms 78:24** (NKJV) calls it, the original angel food cake! This is the food that was not good enough for them!

Isn't this what grumbling always does? Grumbling distorts your vision. It reimagines the past as a golden land, it despises the good gifts that God has surrounded you with in the present, and it completely ignores God's promises for the future. That's why I say that the root of grumbling is unbelief. Grumbling is an unbelief that robs you of your joy. It is the exact opposite of faith, which sees the past and present with clear eyes but has its gaze joyfully fixed on God's promises for the future. Faith believes God's promises to be certain, no matter what difficulties the present may hold.

This also explains why grumbling is so contagious: when we talk to people of faith, we find that strengthens our faith, for we begin to see the world through their eyes. However, when we sit with people caught in unbelief, it is very easy to have our own perspective skewed. We too can start to think more highly than we should of the past and more critically than is accurate of the present. We too can start to say, “Before I became a Christian, how easy my life was. I didn't have to get up on Sunday mornings or give my money to the church or get along with all these people. But now—oh, how awful it is! My life is more than anyone should have to bear.” Or we may say, “Before I got married or had children or moved to my present town, my situation was so much easier and better than it is now. How miserable my life has become!” Or perhaps, “When I was in such and such a church, what a wonderful place it was. We had none of the problems there that we see with this church.” In reality, though, your past was almost certainly not as rosy as you remember it, nor is your present quite as bleak as you may think it to be.

Ronald Allen: vv. 11-15 - this lament has a highly poetic cast to it. It is marked by lines of tricola (three elements) and bicola (two elements) in standard parallel structures familiar from other poetry of the Bible. Moreover, the rhetoric is poetic in nature, expressing deep passion in hyperbolic flourishes. The lament is marked by an inclusio, the use of the same or a similar element at the beginning and the end to give a sense of binding and unity. The poem begins with Moses asking God why he has brought calamity on him, using the verbal form *hreata* (a Hiphil from the verb *raa*, “to treat

badly”). The poem ends with Moses begging the Lord not to let him see the full extent of his calamity, using the noun form *braati* (the noun *raah*, “trouble,” “misery,” plus preposition and pronominal suffixes).

Steven Cole: When Leaders Get Depressed

A leader can get depressed if he lets complaining people get to him; he tries to do everything by himself; or he forgets God’s promises and power to accomplish His purposes.

1. A leader can get depressed if he lets complaining people get to him.
 - A. Sometimes people complain because they don’t like God’s ways, which include adversity.
 - B. Sometimes people complain because they are greedy and expect leaders to meet all their desires.
 - C. Sometimes people complain because they have rejected the Lord.
 - D. When leaders listen to people complain and make impossible demands, it can lead to depression.
2. A leader can get depressed if he tries to do everything by himself.
3. A leader can get depressed if he forgets God’s promises and power to accomplish His purposes.

Dennis Cole: An alternative structural analysis of the text, however, evidences a slightly different focus for the pericope: a crisis of belief in the dialogue between Moses and Yahweh over the nature of the people and the ability of the Lord to supply the needs of his people. The following chiasmic outline gives rise to this central element. Highlighted are several of the Hebrew terms derived from the root *’āsap* (“to gather”), which are keys to understanding the structure and interpreting the content of the passage. Note the following outline of usage:

- (1) a “gathered group” of people (**11:1**) instigate the murmuring;
- (2) Yahweh instructed Moses to “gather” seventy elders (**11:16**) who were spiritual leaders;
- (3) at the crux of the chiasm, Moses uses the term in a rhetorical question regarding the inadequacy of “gathering” all the fish in the sea to satisfy the cravings of the people;
- (4) Moses faithfully “gathered” the seventy elders (**11:24**); and
- (5) the term is used twice to describe the gluttonous group who “gathered” no less than thirty-eight bushels of quail per person.

A second key term is *ta’āwāh* (“craving, desire”), used in v. 4 to describe the intense desires of the people, and in vv. 34 and 35 for the naming of the site. One might call this form of derived nomenclature a talionic toponym, in which the name matches the form of judgment and the original sinful desires of the people.

A second factor contributing to this interpretation is the larger balancing of the elements that compose the larger chiasmic structure of the combined three cycles of rebellion. The complaint and disbelief of Moses in this chapter finds its chiasmic parallel in **Numbers 20**. In the latter passage Moses' frustration, evidenced throughout his travels with the Israelites, turns to outright rebellion in which he violates the holiness of God. Furthermore, the Miriam and Aaron rebellion in **Numbers 12** is paralleled by the death of both brother and sister of Moses in **Num 20:1** and **22–29**.

Chiasmic Structure of the Second Rebellion: A Crisis of Belief for Israel and Moses

- A Complaint of the People (*hā'sapsūp*): Craving (*hit'awwū ta'āwā*) Meat (vv. 4–6)
- B Yahweh's Former Provision: Manna Quality (vv. 7–9)
- C Moses' Complaint about People: Why Trouble (*hārē'ōtā*) Your Servant? (vv. 10–15)
- D Yahweh Responds: Assemble (*'espā*) Seventy Elders (vv. 16–17)
- E Preparation for Provision of Meat: Purification and Confession (vv. 18–20)
- F Moses Expresses Disbelief to Yahweh (vv. 21–22)
- F' Yahweh Responds to Moses' Disbelief (v. 23)
- E' Preparation for Blessing: Elders Assembled (*wayye'ēsōp*) (v. 24)
- D' Yahweh Sends Spirit upon the Seventy Elders (vv. 25–27)
- C' Moses Responds to Joshua's Complaint (vv. 28–30)
- B' Yahweh's Fresh Provision of Meat (*wayya'aspū ... 'āsap*) (vv. 31–32)
- A' Plague upon the People (*qibrōt hata'āwā*, “Graves of Craving”) (vv. 33–34)

TEXT: Numbers 11:24-35

TITLE: *RESOLVING COMPLAINTS -- BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR*

BIG IDEA:

GOD DEALS EFFECTIVELY WITH FRUSTRATION IN LEADERSHIP AND WITH THE SINFUL COMPLAINTS OF THOSE WHO DESPISE HIS GRACIOUS PROVISION

INTRODUCTION:

This passage completes the first half of the chapter where various issues and complaints had been raised. Here God addresses these issues and complaints – but not always in the way in which people might have desired. Because Moses became frustrated with the burdens of leadership, God distributed those responsibilities to 70 leading elders who could function as his assistants. The empowering and authenticating of those leaders was all controlled by the Spirit of God and not subject to any human motivations of jealousy or preference.

Regarding the discontent over God’s gracious provision of manna for the steady diet in the wilderness, God responded in two ways. He first graciously gave the people the meat they had requested in the form of quail – but in excess to the point where it became loathsome. He then converted that provision into a destructive plague to discipline the people for their failure to trust in God’s provision and lust after their own selfish cravings.

Ronald Allen: This chapter interplays several themes: the arrogant lust of the people, the impassioned distress of Moses, the plan of god to bring an answer of judgment to the people, and the purpose of the Lord to bring an answer of grace to his servant.

I. (:24-25) DISTRIBUTING THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

A. (:24) Preparing the Chosen Leaders

1. Importance of the Word of the Lord

“So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD.”

2. Selection of the Chosen Leaders

“Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people,”

3. Positioning of the Chosen Leaders

“and stationed them around the tent.”

B. (:25a) Empowering the Chosen Leaders

1. Importance of the Word of the Lord

“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him;”

2. Gifting of the Holy Spirit

“and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy elders.”

Dennis Cole: The promise of the sharing of the Spirit of God with the seventy elders, as delineated in v. 17, is now fulfilled. With Moses in his traditional position at the entrance to the tent, the place of revelatory activity, and with the elders of the people stationed around the Tent of Meeting in close proximity, the symbolic presence of the Lord in the form of the cloud descends and speaks with Moses. As the Lord conversed with his special servant, he apportioned some of his Spirit with which he had endowed Moses among the surrounding elders. The language of the Hebrew text evidences that this distribution of the Spirit was carried out by God and as such did not diminish that portion of the Spirit that had rested upon Moses previously. The elders’ authority was derived through Moses, and as such they functioned as an extension of the ultimate authority endowed upon Moses by the Lord. It was God’s Spirit who was disseminated among the seventy elders, not that of Moses, and thus not lessened. This impartation was a unique gift of God upon the leaders and scribes that would enable them to assist Moses in giving spiritual oversight and supervision to this large rebellious congregation.

C. (:25b) Authenticating the Chosen Leaders

1. Importance of the Word of the Lord

“And it came about that when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied.”

Charlie Garrett: Here is the first use of the verb *nava*, or prophesy, in the Bible. It comes from the noun *navi*, or prophet. We are not told what they prophesied, and so for us it doesn’t matter what they said or sang. It simply indicates an uttering forth of praise of, or of the will of God. What matters is that the same Spirit rested on all, demonstrating that the Spirit that was upon Moses was sufficient to meet the challenges he faced, even if he was not. Now, that same Spirit would be with the seventy who would work with Moses to meet the challenges as a united whole.

That they never prophesied again simply means that they were not called to be prophets. Instead, they were called to be assistants to the prophet. The Spirit is One, and He apportions the gifts according to His wisdom.

2. Isolated Instance of the Authenticating Experience

“But they did not do it again.”

Dennis Cole: After that one occasion in which spiritual endowment resulted in a prophetic manifestation, the text says they did not continue to exhibit that activity.⁵⁶ That is not to say that their newly appointed role of spiritual leadership was discontinued, but only that this identifiable evidence of their spiritual anointing was not repeated.

Charlie Garrett: This is the last time that the role of these elders is mentioned. We have no idea how they assisted Moses, or under what circumstances. The account itself stands as a witness to the fact that it happened because Moses felt unable to bear the weight of the people of the camp alone. And yet, it testifies to the fact that the Spirit, whether alone on Moses, or spread out among many, was sufficient to the task. With the matter settled, the men returned to the camp to consecrate themselves for the next day, as instructed.

II. (:26-30) DISCERNING THE LEGITIMACY OF LEADERSHIP

A. (:26) Unique Ministry of Eldad and Medad

1. Uniquely Separated from the Other Leaders

“But two men had remained in the camp;”

2. Uniquely Identified by Name

“the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad.”

3. Uniquely Prophesying in the Camp

*“And the Spirit rested upon them
(now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent),
and they prophesied in the camp.”*

B. (:27) Unsettling Report

*“So a young man ran and told Moses and said,
‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’”*

Here is evidence of ministry that is outside of our comfort zone

Brown: The story is a persuasive reminder that the Holy Spirit is totally sovereign and acts in any way he determines. He will not be stereotyped and his actions cannot be precisely predicted to conform to purely human conventions. . . It is arrogant to suppose that the Lord can be manipulated or maneuvered by actions we may plan.

C. (:28-29) Contrasting Perspectives of Joshua and Moses – How to React?

1. (:28) Jealous Perspective of Joshua

*“Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth,
answered and said, ‘Moses, my lord, restrain them.’”*

Brown; Without discovering why Eldad and Medad had not been present, Joshua thought there was something improper about their manifestation of the Spirit’s endowment. Because God had acted in a particular (and appropriate) way for ‘*the seventy*’, he could not tolerate any deviation from that norm. How easy it is to institutionalize the Spirit’s work or to endeavour to anticipate, organize or monopolize his ministry! Treasured events quickly become rigid patterns and inflexible traditions.

The Holy Spirit will not be shackled by ecclesiastical customs, however good they may be. He will act with total freedom to accomplish whatever purposes he knows are best for his people at that particular time.

This story of Joshua's misplaced criticism of Eldad and Medad has a remarkable parallel in the Gospels, when the disciples tried to stop 'a man driving out demons' in Christ's name. Christ had a larger canvas by far: '*whoever is not against you is for you*'.

2. (:29) Joyous Perspective of Moses

"But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!"

Roy Gane: Moses recognizes that the Spirit transcends his control and the people cannot have too much of this divine power. **Abraham Heschel** observes, "The spiritual is not something we own, but something we may share in. We do not possess it; we may be possessed by it." Rather than being jealous of the spiritual gifts granted to others, Moses rejoices and desires the best for all of God's people.

Brueggemann: Moses's yearning was surely a godly wish. Joel echoed it in his promise of a democratized outpouring of the Spirit (**Joel 2:28–32**), and Peter's Pentecost sermon spoke of its implementation (**Acts 2:17–21**). The same sentiment drove Paul's wish that all would speak in tongues (**1 Cor 14:5**) and that all should eagerly desire the greater gifts, especially prophecy (**1 Cor 12:27–31; 14:1–5**). Just as Moses chided Joshua, so, too, Paul cautioned the early church: "*Do not stifle the Holy Spirit*" (**1 Thess 5:19**).

F. B. Meyer: This one saying proves the incomparable greatness of Moses' character. Little souls are monopolists. They like to be good and gifted, because it gives them a kind of superiority to others; but they dislike to see a leveling-up process at work by which the Eldads and Medads are lifted to stand by their side.

This was the mistake of Joshua. — When he heard that Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp, he said, "My lord Moses, forbid them!" But he was immature, a saint in the process of manufacture, and smitten with jealousy, for the sake of his master and friend. This was the complaint of John's disciples, when they saw the crowds ebbing away from their great teacher.

This was the quarrel of the Pharisees, that Jesus made religion so cheap and accessible to all, that even the publicans and sinners received his priceless wares.

But when a man is really great and good, he longs that all should be as he is, and better; he takes a deep delight in the spread of vital godliness; he is glad when others are endowed with greater gifts than himself, that they may make the Gospel better known than he could ever do; he is content to decrease, if Christ may only increase; he is willing that affliction should be added to his bonds, if only Christ may be magnified; he prays that the Lord would put his Spirit on all his people. This is very unnatural to any

of us; but God, the Holy Spirit, waits to baptize us even into this, and to make the glory of God the object of our life. Make haste, O blessed Paraclete, and do this for me!

D. (:30) Resolution with Minimum of Drama

“Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.”

Francis Schaeffer: Joshua had another lesson to learn, and a very serious one: God’s glory is to come first. There is a great difference between leadership and self-aggrandizement. There is to be leadership among the people of God, according to the gifts He bestows, but there is not to be glorification of oneself or other men. Joshua asked that Eldad and Medad be forbidden to prophesy because they had not come before Moses in the tabernacle; but Moses answered magnificently, “Don’t envy for my sake.” Maybe Moses’ response is one of the reasons the Bible says that Moses was a meek man. Though Moses was such a tremendous leader, he would not tolerate Joshua’s glorifying him.

The young man Joshua was learning a lesson that anybody who is ever going to be worth anything in leadership must learn. None of us learns it completely, of course, and yet we must master it if we are going to be of any use in the Church of God. A leader must never confuse himself with God. When a person begins to exercise certain gifts and God brings him to a place of leadership in the Church of Christ, how easy it is to do this. Yet this is the destruction of all true spiritual leadership.

Joshua also had to learn that a person cannot bind God with man-made rules. Joshua had a man-made rule: God really should not have placed His Spirit on the two men in the camp. This did not fit into Joshua’s concept of what was good and proper. God has bound Himself with rules based on his own character, which He will never break; but men (including God’s leaders) must never try to bind Him with their own rules. He will not keep these rules.

III. (:31-34) DEALING WITH THE DISCONTENT OVER GOD’S PROVISION

A. (:31-32) Provision of Meat as Demanded by the People – But in Excess

1. (:31) Miraculous Quantity of Quail

a. Divine Intervention

*“Now there went forth a wind from the LORD,
and it brought quail from the sea,
and let them fall beside the camp,”*

Gordon Wenham: Quails are small birds of the partridge family. They migrate northwards from Arabia and Africa in the spring (from the middle of March) and return again in the autumn (August to October). Their route takes them over Egypt, Sinai and Palestine.

Dennis Cole: The passage builds upon the parallel usage of the Hebrew *rûah* as spirit or wind. The Spirit of God had blessed the seventy elders with prophetic gifts, and now

the wind of God would bless the people with food provisions. The magnitude of the two forms of blessing was copious. God had previously supplied his people with quail in the early days of their journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai (**Exod 16:13**). Now in the early days after their departure from the mountain of God, he supplied them with an even greater outpouring of his power than they imagined or wanted.

Robert Rayburn: You remember that both in Hebrew and Greek the word for *Spirit* and the word for *wind* is the same. The Spirit rested on the 70 and the wind brought the quail. It is the same working of the Lord in both cases, but one will bring blessing and the other will bring a curse. The worldly are often judged by being given precisely what they want and what they ask for, but what they wanted and asked for proves to be deadly to them. How many people have been ruined forever by the ease, the comfort, and the pleasures with which they have filled up their lives!

Irving Jensen: The next events were a sequence of miracle upon miracle, explained in no other way:

- (1) A miraculous wind (**11:31**).
- (2) Quails from the sea area, probably from the Arabian Gulf to the southeast (**11:31**).
- (3) The quails dropped at the camp (**11:31**).
- (4) The miraculous number of quails (**11:31, 32**), blown off normal course in their migration, so that the birds flew waist high (three feet) above the surface of the earth. The flight lasted so long that the Israelites stood for two days and a night knocking down the quails. To keep them from spoiling the quails were spread about the camp to dry in the sun (**11:32b**).
- (5) The climactic miracle of judgment, in which God smote a number of the people with a very great plague (**11:33**). This is the first major decimation of the journeying host.

b. Distributed Around the Camp at a Manageable Distance

*“about a day's journey on this side
and a day's journey on the other side,
all around the camp,”*

c. Dumped on the Ground to an Excessive Depth

“and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground.”

Eugene Merrill: the Lord caused them to fly about three feet above the ground so the people could easily capture them or club them to the ground. This seems much better than the commonly held impression that the quail were piled up in a layer three feet thick a day's walk in every direction from the camp.

J. A. Thompson: It may be, of course, that we ought to understand *let them fall* in a more literal sense and that the quails came in such abundance that they covered the ground to a depth of 3 feet. Either way it is a miracle of divine timing and of divine abundance.

2. (:32) Method for Gathering and Processing

a. Gathering Procedure

“And the people spent all day and all night and all the next day, and gathered the quail”

Ronald Allen: The scene must have been similar to a riot: people screaming, birds flapping their wings, everywhere the pell-mell movement of a meat-hungry people in a sea of birds. Dare we picture people ripping at the birds, eating flesh before cooking it, bestial in behavior? They must have been like a sugar-crazed boy in a child’s daydream, afloat on a chocolate sandwich cookie raft in a sea of chocolate syrup, nibbling at the cookie before drowning in the dark, sweet sea.

b. Gathering Minimum

“(he who gathered least gathered ten homers)”

c. Processing Procedure

“and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.”

B. (:33-34) Plague of Destruction Tied to the Consumption of the Quail

1. (:33) Plague Executed

a. Timing

“While the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed,”

Elmer Smick: The idea is that before they had finished eating all the quail, the plague broke out.

b. Motivation = the Anger of the Lord

“the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people,”

J. Ligon Duncan: Matthew Henry has this fascinating comment. He says that the Lord sends the quail first so that no one would have been able to say, well, the Lord just judged Israel because He couldn’t provide them the meat. He provides them meat, and then He judges them to show that this is not a matter of a lack of His power to do things. This is a matter about their hearts and whether they will trust Him for what they really need. That is so huge, because what happens when our desires are left unsatisfied is we so often do what? We question the power of God to be able to give us what we need, and that is never ever the question. The question is, are we ready to submit our will to the One who is able to do anything? So there is a huge spiritual battle for the hearts of the people of God going on here, and they’re failing miserably. So there you see the sin of the people.

c. Severity

“and the LORD struck the people with a very severe plague.”

Roy Gane: The people's indulgence for a month until quail comes out their noses (cf. **11:20**) is interrupted. Before the meat is "cut off" (*krt*, i.e., runs out; cf. **Joel 1:5, 16**), God's anger (lit., "nose") burns against them and he strikes them (Hiphil of *nkh*) a great blow (*makkah*; **Num. 11:33**). This can be called a divine "plague," which may involve sickness, such as a form of bacterial food poisoning that induces vomiting (possibly including out the nose). However, similar language in **1 Samuel 6:19** seems to describe a more sudden fate for the people of Beth Shemesh who presume to look into the ark of the covenant.

Whatever the precise nature of the "plague" resulting from quail, its acute onset is deadly, as implied by the name given to the place: *Kibroth Hattaavah* ("the graves of craving," **Num. 11:34**). Like a number of other stages along the Israelites' itinerary (cf. **ch. 33**), the location of this site has been lost.

Eugene Merrill: Their sin was, in effect, a rejection of the Lord and His bountiful provision in favor of an unbridled appetite. As Paul later said of the enemies of Christ, "Their god is their stomach" (**Phil. 3:9**).

2. (:34) Plague Commemorated

"So the name of that place was called Kibroth-hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had been greedy."

Brueggemann: Once again, a negative memorial was established (cf. **11:3**); that place got called Glutton's Cemetery (**11:34**). "He gave them their desire: but he sent leanness into their soul" (**Ps 106:15**, Geneva Bible).

C.H.M.: The closing paragraph of our chapter shows us the people in the miserable and fatal enjoyment of that for which their hearts had lusted. "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul." They got what they longed for, and found it death. They would have flesh, and with the flesh came the judgment of God. This is most solemn. May we heed the warning. The poor heart if full of vain desires and hateful lusts. The heavenly Manna fails to satisfy. There must be something else. God allows us to have it. But what then? Leanness – barrenness – judgment! O Lord, keep our hearts fixed on Thyself alone and at all times! Be Thou the ever-satisfying portion of our souls, while we tread this desert, and till we see Thy face in glory!

(:35) EPILOGUE / TRANSITION

"From Kibroth-hattaavah the people set out for Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth."

Timothy Ashley: This verse is simply a transition that takes the Israelites from the scene of their last conflict to the scene of their next one—Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' leadership at Hazeroth.

Dennis Cole: The reverberating succession of rebellion narratives in this first cycle of

insurrections against God continues with a challenge to the leadership authority and the special character and calling of the prophet Moses. **Milgrom** even suggests that “the uniqueness of Moses is the sole theme of this chapter.” The first rebellion was a general complaint against God in the setting of the wilderness, and the second was a protest over the quality of the food supply God had so faithfully provided in that austere desert location. Now the protest becomes more narrowly focused. Now it is a struggle within the family of Moses concerning his position within the community and his unique relationship with God. If the event recounted in this chapter follows in chronological order that of the previous chapter, the physical setting is at Hazeroth, on the way from Mount Sinai to the Wilderness of Paran, in the northeast quadrant of the Sinai peninsula.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Why is the Word of God given such prominence in this section?
- 2) What lessons can we apply to church leadership from this early introduction of shared leadership?
- 3) What prompted the difference in perspectives between how Joshua and Moses responded to the unexpected manifestation of the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Eldad and Medad?
- 4) When have we seen God give us something that we craved only to teach us painful lessons about our sinful desires?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Warren Wiersbe: The Lord had warned Israel that the way they treated the daily manna would be a test of their obedience to His word (**Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:3**). In rejecting the manna, Israel really rejected the Lord (**Num. 11:20**, NIV), and it was this rebellious attitude that invited the judgment of God. This reminds us that the way we treat God’s Word is the way we treat the Lord Himself. To ignore the Word, treat it carelessly, or willfully disobey it is to ask for the discipline of God (**Heb. 12:5-11**). Instead of feeding on the things of the world that bring death, let’s cultivate an appetite for the holy Word of God (**Job 23:12; Ps. 1:1; Jer. 15:16; Matt. 4:4; Luke 10:38-42; 1 Peter 2:1-3**).

Charlie Garrett: Where we find our ultimate sufficiency is where we will find our fullest joy. If we really love quail, even if it is completely unavailable, but we are still content in Christ, then it doesn’t matter if we don’t have quail. . .

Today we will see a group of people who are unsatisfied with that which is of the highest value of all. In turn, their hearts turn back to what they first had, not realizing that what they want will never satisfy. If you can't be satisfied in the One who made the quail, you sure won't be satisfied with the quail He made. Let us remember that only the Lord can truly fill every need and desire we have. Anything less will disappoint. This is one of those important lessons we find in His superior word. . .

<http://superiorword.org/numbers-11-16-35-be-careful-what-you-ask-for/>

Dennis Cole: Chiastic Structure of the Second Rebellion: A Crisis of Belief for Israel and Moses

- A Complaint of the People (*hā'sapsūp*): Craving (*hit'awwū ta'āwā*) Meat (vv. 4–6)
- B Yahweh's Former Provision: Manna Quality (vv. 7–9)
- C Moses' Complaint about People: Why Trouble (*hārē'ōtā*) Your Servant? (vv. 10–15)
- D Yahweh Responds: Assemble (*'espā*) Seventy Elders (vv. 16–17)
- E Preparation for Provision of Meat: Purification and Confession (vv. 18–20)
- F Moses Expresses Disbelief to Yahweh (vv. 21–22)
- F' Yahweh Responds to Moses' Disbelief (v. 23)
- E' Preparation for Blessing: Elders Assembled (*wayye'ēsōp*) (v. 24)
- D' Yahweh Sends Spirit upon the Seventy Elders (vv. 25–27)
- C' Moses Responds to Joshua's Complaint (vv. 28–30)
- B' Yahweh's Fresh Provision of Meat (*wayya'aspū ... 'āsap*) (vv. 31–32)
- A' Plague upon the People (*qibrōt hata'āwā*, "Graves of Craving") (vv. 33–34)

TEXT: Numbers 12:1-16

TITLE: *DIVINE RECKONING FOR LEADERSHIP ENVY*

BIG IDEA:

**LEADERSHIP ENVY (WHICH CHALLENGES GOD'S AUTHORITY)
RECEIVES GOD'S DISCIPLINE OF SHAME AND HUMILIATION**

INTRODUCTION:

The fear of God should give one pause when it comes to challenging His authority by speaking against His divinely appointed spiritual leaders. Here we have the close family members and ministry associates of Moses complaining that they are not respected on his level. God's angry response is swift and decisive. Instead of Miriam and Aaron grasping greater glory for themselves, their rebellious complaint leads to temporary disease, shame and humiliation. But even in dispensing severe discipline, God acts in love and compassion and mercy to mitigate the harm done. Eventually the camp of the Israelites is reunited under the leadership of Moses and able to move forward to reach Paran – the key staging area to prepare for entrance into the Promised Land.

Gordon Wenham: In form and content this story of Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' supreme authority has many points in common with the previous two episodes. Though this protest appears to be much less serious than the widespread popular discontent described in the previous chapter, it was in fact a peculiarly piquant and fundamental one. It was not just a case of petty family jealousy, for Aaron, Moses' brother, was also the high priest and therefore supreme religious leader and most holy man in Israel; while Miriam, his sister, was a prophetess and thus head of the spirit-filled women (**Exod. 15:20f.**). Here, then, is an alliance of priest and prophet, the two archetypes of Israelite religion, challenging Moses' position as sole mediator between God and Israel. His vindication is at once decisive and dramatic: indeed the description of his position and office clearly prefigures that of our Lord in the New Testament.

Gordon Keddie: The message of all of these complaints – the “people” and their alleged hardships (**11:1**), the “rabble” and their desire for meat (**11:4**), and Miriam and Aaron over Moses' leadership (**12:1**) – is, as **James Philip** aptly comments, “not that they were finally lost, but that they were disqualified in the purposes of God – a grim and solemn reality. This murmuring, complaining, critical spirit . . . got into them, and did something to them, rendering them progressively incapable of rising to their divine calling until, at a moment of crisis, they crashed.” The seeds of compromise soon flourish as the weeds of failure.

I. (:1-3) LEADERSHIP ENVY (JEALOUS JOCKEYING -- MORE THAN JUST A FAMILY FEUD) – RIVALS TO THE LEADERSHIP OF MOSES

A. (:1-2a) Attack on the Leadership of Moses

1. (:1) Criticism of Moses by Miriam and Aaron

“Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman);”

This was just a smokescreen issue for the real cause of the leadership crisis = desire to be viewed as equal to Moses

Dennis Cole: The section begins with the feminine singular form of the verb *watēdabber*, implicating Miriam as the leader in this endeavor.

MacArthur: Ethiopia (also known as Cush) S. of Egypt, was inhabited by the descendants of Cush, the firstborn son of Ham (**Ge 10:6, 7**). Although the term “Cushite” could have been used concerning Zipporah, Moses’ first wife, it seems more likely that Moses had remarried after the death of Zipporah. The marriage to the Ethiopian woman had been recent and furnished the pretext for the attack of Miriam and Aaron.

Timothy Ashley: Since Cushites were not Israelites, perhaps the Cushite woman referred to was a part of the mixed multitude of **Exod. 12:38**, or even one of the rabble of **Num. 11:4**. If the latter speculation is true (and it is speculation), then a complaint from Miriam may not be surprising, especially in the light of what had just happened at Kibroth-hattaavah. Another basis for this complaint may well be the fact that Miriam and Aaron were not included in the sharing of the Spirit in **ch. 11**, and this complaint about a foreign wife was really only a surface issue that concealed the deeper problem of jealousy over their brother’s unique status before God in the community (see v. 2).

Roy Gane: “First lady”? That may explain why Miriam is mentioned before Aaron as the instigator of criticism (**12:1**). With her brothers, she was a leader of the Exodus (**Mic. 6:4**). It was “Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister,” who took a tambourine and led all the Israelite women in a song of triumph at the Red Sea (**Ex. 15:20–21**). Now she likely feels displaced, perhaps by one who has never experienced the horrors of slavery and the trauma of leaving Egypt. . .

Although we should not hasten to import all of our modern conceptions of racism into the context of ancient Israel, which incorporated many kinds of foreigners throughout its history, it seems clear that a kind of racism does have a negative impact within the complex social dynamics reflected in **Numbers 12**. God’s devastating reaction implies that he regards such an attitude as intolerable moral “leprosy.”

Iain Duguid: Legalism -- Marriage outside the covenant community was not forbidden (except for marriage to the tribes that occupied the land of Canaan); yet it was potentially risky behavior. There was the inherent danger of marrying someone who might not share your spiritual values. The key point is that it was not forbidden by God per se. Perhaps Miriam and Aaron would have claimed simply to be concerned for

Moses' spiritual welfare, but the fact is that they sought to safeguard it in the wrong way, by expanding the scope of the Law beyond what God had decreed.

Constable: Evidently Miriam and Aaron felt their leading roles in Israel as prophetess (**Exodus 15:20**) and high priest were losing distinctiveness as God gave 70 elders the privilege of mediating His word. Perhaps Miriam saw in Moses' new wife a threat to her role as the leading female in Israel. Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman may have been nothing more than an excuse.

2. (:2a) Self Promotion by Miriam and Aaron

“and they said, ‘Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?’”

Gordon Wenham: Miriam and Aaron claim that the Lord speaks with them in the same intimate way that he speaks with Moses. ‘*Speak with*’ is a better rendering of the Hebrew *dibber bē* than *rsv* speak through (2), for the same phrase is used in **verses 6 and 8** of the close and intimate discussions between God and his servants. Their questioning of Moses' unique authority follows the account of the sharing of Moses' spirit with the seventy elders, which could be interpreted as showing that Moses was just first among equals. However, the very terms in which Aaron and Miriam phrased their challenge shows they recognized there was a difference in fact between their authority and Moses'. This is confirmed by God's words in **verses 6 to 8**, the judgment on Miriam in **verse 10**, Aaron's inability to help her (**11–12**) and her cure through Moses' intercession (**13–15**).

Raymond Brown: The bitter complaint expressed by Aaron and Miriam was hurtful to Moses, offensive to God, damaging to the grumblers and a warning to the people.

B. (:2b) Expect a Response from the Lord

“And the LORD heard it.”

This has an ominous tone about it.

C. (:3) Don't Expect a Response from Moses

“(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)”

not going to get serious push-back from Moses; contrast how the Apostle Paul recognized the serious nature of attacks against his apostleship and aggressively took up his defense.

Raymond Brown: The word humble is from a root meaning ‘*bowed down*’; in leadership he was genuinely ‘subordinating his personal interests to those of God and his cause’. His sensitive spirit must have been profoundly disturbed when members of his own family questioned his divinely appointed role and, particularly, his responsibility as the Lord's mouthpiece (2). His brother and sister, of all people, knew

how diffidently he had undertaken the demanding tasks God had entrusted to him. God had provided Aaron as his supportive colleague, and the two brothers became devoted partners in confronting Pharaoh with God's commands. Yet, little more than a year later, the cooperative partnership was fractured. A genuinely humble man who steadily pursued the will of God for the glory of God found the conflict specially distressing.

Warren Wiersbe: Moses proved his meekness (humility) by refusing to fight them; he left his cause in the hands of God. God has promised to defend His servants (**Isa. 54:17**)....In his writings, Moses was honest enough to record his sins and failures, and we accept what he wrote, so why can't we accept a statement about his godly character?

II. (:4-8) DIVINE DEFENSE – DON'T MESS WITH MOSES

A. (:4) Court Called into Session

“And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, ‘You three come out to the tent of meeting.’ So the three of them came out.”

Dennis Cole: The Lord interjected himself into the dispute suddenly and awesomely.

Allen describes the Lord's entrance into the situation as “an abrupt response of the Lord that was pregnant with terror.” All three siblings are summoned to come out to the Tent of Meeting, probably to the entrance of that central locale of divine revelation. . . The hearing took place in the context of the visible evidence of the presence of the Lord, for the cloud pillar descended and stood erect at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

G. Campbell Morgan: “*The Lord spoke suddenly unto Moses*” -- That is an arresting statement. It marks an action on the part of God, so definite and immediate, that to Moses His speech was that of suddenness. It lends emphasis to the importance of this story. It is the story of rebellion against Moses, the God-appointed leader of the people, on the part of Miriam his sister, and Aaron his brother. The occasion was that of Moses' marriage with a Cushite woman. This was not the reason of it. It gave Miriam and Aaron an opportunity of acting upon a deeper feeling of jealousy which was present in their hearts. They resented the exercise of Moses' authority, evidently desiring to share it with him in a larger degree. The story illustrates a great truth in human experience. Sooner or later, if there be hidden evil, circumstances will occur in which it will be outwardly manifested. Stern and majestic was the Divine method of dealing with this outbreak. The sudden summons of God brought these three people out from the host, and into the immediate presence of God. Then in the plainest terms Jehovah vindicated His servant. Thus are we taught that God will not permit any interference with His appointments. To question the authority of those whom He appoints is to question His authority. There is great beauty in the end of the story. Aaron pleaded with Moses on behalf of his sister. Moses pleaded with God on her behalf. The cry was heard, and after seven days Miriam was restored. Surely He is ever a God ready to pardon. Nevertheless, the warning was solemn and severe, showing that rebellion is most reprehensible when it is manifested by the most highly placed.

B. (:5-6a) Supreme Judge Appears

1. (:5a) Impressive Presence

“Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam.”

Supreme example of being called out; being called on the carpet.

2. (:5b-6a) Impactful Proclamation

“When they had both come forward, 6 He said, ‘Hear now My words:’”

This must have been an awkward confrontation.

C. (:6b-8) Defense of the Divinely Appointed Leadership of Moses

1. (:6b-8a) Uniqueness of Role of Moses

a. (:6b) Elevated Above Normal Prophets

“If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream.”

Dennis Cole: Should only Moses hold the position of leadership in the prophetic community of Israel as well as the community at large? Should he hold such a unique status while yet having a foreign wife? That Miriam and Aaron possessed prophetic gifts was not the issue. Both are described in prophetic terms in the Old Testament.

b. (:7-8a) Exalted to the Most Intimate Relationship

1) Faithful Servant – I delegate the highest level of responsibilities to him

“Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household;”

Eugene Merrill: a reference Moses’ faithful performance of his role as covenant mediator between God and Israel.

2) Confidant – I fully disclose Myself to him – Both Verbally and Visually

“With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the LORD.”

Brueggemann: friendship is probably in view here (**Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10**). “The image is that of a royal house in which only the most trusted servant has regular access to the monarch. Such ones are literally called ‘those who see the face of the king.’”

Gordon Wenham: Whereas ordinary prophets had to be content with receiving God’s word through dreams and visions and in riddles, Moses is in a different class. He is God’s servant entrusted with looking after all his estate, i.e. Israel, and like other men in

his position he has immediate access to the owner of the estate (**Gen. 24:2; 40:20**). He speaks to God directly mouth to mouth and therefore can interpret God's will for Israel with total authority. Other men in the Old Testament, e.g. Abraham, Joshua, David and Elijah (**Gen. 26:24; Josh. 24:29; 2 Sam. 7:5; 2 Kgs 10:10**), are called God's servants, but only Moses is described as entrusted with all my house. Finally he sees the very form (*tēmûnâ*) of God (**8**). That is not to say he saw God directly and unveiled. This, apparently, was the privilege that Moses requested when he asked to see God's 'face'. On that occasion he had to be content with seeing God's 'back' (**Exod. 33:18–23**). The word 'form' (Hebrew *tēmûnâ*) is used of visual representations, pictures or images, of earthly and heavenly beings (**Exod. 20:4**). Job saw someone's form, but could not identify the person from it (**Job 4:16**). Thus, although Moses enjoyed a much closer relationship with God than any ordinary prophet, he saw only God's form, not the very being of God.

Roy Gane: As God's messenger, Moses plays a crucial role in making theocracy work by conveying the divine will to the Israelites. The Lord is the religious and civil leader of Israel through Moses. Other prominent roles of Moses that are based on his intimate connection with God include miracle-working deliverer (e.g. **Ex. 3:10; 4:1–9; 7:8–21**), highest judge (**Ex. 18:13–26; Deut. 1:17**), founder of the Israelite ritual system (**Ex. 40; Lev. 8**), and intercessor (**Ex. 32:11–14, 31–33; 33:12–17; Num. 14:13–19**). Other biblical individuals perform some of the same functions as Moses, but none comes close to matching his foundational and comprehensive leadership as the "father of his country."

Harrison: Although God had in fact spoken through others, such as the elders who prophesied when part of the gifts of Moses were bestowed upon them, it was the great Israelite leader himself who was commissioned to convey the Lord's will to the covenant community (cf. **Heb. 3:2–6**).

2. (:8b) Ungodly Arrogance to Dare to Criticize Moses

"Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?"

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Brueggemann: Miriam and Aaron were out of line, and the Lord went away "angry with them" (**12:9**). How much worse for those who reject the Logos made flesh (**John 1:1, 14**)—those who oppose the one who is "entrusted with God's entire house" (**Heb 3:2–6**).

Matthew Henry: "How dare you abuse any servant of mine, especially such a servant as Moses, who is a friend, a confidant and steward of the house? " How durst they speak to the grief and reproach of one whom God had so much to say in the commendation of! Might they not expect that God would resent it, and take it as an affront to himself?

III. (:9-15) DIVINE DISCIPLINE BUT MERCIFUL MITIGATION

A. (:9-10) The Angry Judgment

1. (:9) Display of God's Anger

“So the anger of the LORD burned against them and He departed.”

Raymond Brown: There they were, at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, abandoned by God. The Lord left them (9) in their sins, isolated in their guilt, silenced by their transgression and subdued by deep remorse. The pillar of cloud, a perpetual reminder of God's presence and holiness, was lifted way above the Tent. God had spoken his word of condemnation and walked out on them, leaving them in their solitariness to feel the enormity of their sin.

2. (:10) Description of Judgment = Miriam Struck with Skin Disease

“But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous.”

B. (:11-13) The Intercessory Appeal

1. (:11-12) Aaron Appeals to Moses

a. (:11) Expression of Repentance and Plea for Mercy

“Then Aaron said to Moses, ‘Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us, in which we have acted foolishly and in which we have sinned.’”

Must have been very humbling for Aaron to have to come crawling to Moses for help and intervention.

Timothy Ashley: It is literarily interesting that Yahweh's judgment on Miriam made her skin very white, since her complaint against her brother's Cushite wife concerned a woman whose skin was probably dark. This judgment by reversal is another reason to connect this judgment with the original complaint in which Miriam took the lead (v. 1), rather than the assertion of equality with Moses, in which Aaron took the lead (vv. 4–5). This reversal is not the only ironic element in the story.

11–13 Aaron intercedes with Moses who, in turn, intercedes with Yahweh for Miriam's restoration. Here again, the irony is obvious. Aaron, who had wanted to be able to be like his brother in the latter's role as a speaker for Yahweh, is forced to intercede with Moses who intercedes with God. Thus the theme of equality and the complaint over Moses' wife (issuing in this judgment) come together at this point. Yahweh is right—**Moses is special!**

Dennis Cole: With deep emotion Aaron immediately apologized to Moses, addressing him as lord and submissively confessing his sin of rebellion. He who had opposed Yahweh's servant so presumptuously, promptly placed himself in the servant position under that very same individual. Perhaps attempting to lighten the potential judgment against himself, he characterized his transgression as foolishness. The Hebrew *yā'al* is a

rare term used in **Isa 19:13** and **Jer 5:4** and **50:36** to refer to a person who acts in a delusional manner as a result of ignorance, of one lacking knowledge of God and his ways. As such his offense could be expiated through a propitiatory act of intercession. Intentional rebelliousness was punishable by banishment or death by stoning. Out of concern for his stricken sister, he begged Moses not to hold Miriam culpable for their sin, by which she might be afflicted even further with chronic leprosy. He asked that God not afflict Miriam such that she might have the appearance of a stillborn child, whose scaly flesh would sometimes peel off with the amniotic fluids when handled after birth. The Hebrew phrase at the beginning of v. 12 literally reads, “Please do not let her be like the dead,” which heightens Aaron’s appeal; he realized that if she continued in this state, she might die.

b. (:12) Dismay at the Horrific Nature of the Disease

“Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother's womb!”

2. (:13) Moses Intercedes with God for Healing

“And Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘O God, heal her, I pray!’”

What graciousness and forgiveness on the part of Moses to passionately plead for mercy and healing for Miriam.

Dennis Cole: The urgency of his plea is reflected in this terse request through his use of the short form *El* in referring to God and the imperative verb form in pleading for her physical restoration. The prayer is stated in monosyllables and in an introverted structure in the Hebrew text: *’ēl nā’ rēpā’ nā’ lāh*, with the pivotal focus being on the term for healing (*rēpā’*).

C. (:14-15) The Merciful Mitigation of the Shameful Curse

1. (:14) Some Shame is Necessary – Healing and Humbling

“But the LORD said to Moses, ‘If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again.’”

Eugene Merrill: Spitting in one’s face expressed contempt (cf. **Deut. 25:9**). The Lord expressed His contempt for Miriam’s presumption by afflicting her with a horrible skin disease.

2. (:15a) Cleansing and Isolation Limited to Seven Days

“So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days,”

3. (:15b) Punishment Impacted the Entire Camp

“and the people did not move on until Miriam was received again.”

Raymond Brown: The offence of Aaron and Miriam had held them up in their desert travels, but it would be a week well spent if it taught them to honour God and to shun sin. Sadly, they were not good learners; the Lord's patience was to be tried even more. On the immediate horizon was an act not of family rivalry but of community rebellion. In the desert of Paran, they did not merely denigrate Moses; they defied God, as we shall see next.

Dennis Cole: While Miriam was going through her required period of separation and ritual purification, the Israelite camp remained at Hazeroth. This delay was perhaps out of some respect or admiration for Miriam and her noble place within the community leadership. But also Israel would not disembark on the next stage of the journey to the Promised Land until the Lord would lead them by the cloud. Hence the seriousness of the rebellion of one of Israel's leaders is magnified, and the consequences of such an act would affect the entire community. They must all wait upon the Lord until he leads them. In the period of Israel's entrance into Canaan under Joshua, the sin of one man's (Achan) family resulted in their being defeated in the strategic battle at Ai (**Josh 7:1-5**). Only after the restoration of one of their key leaders would the people of Israel be allowed to move toward their final destination, the promised Holy Land.

(:16) EPILOGUE – GEOGRAPHICAL TRANSITION

“Afterward, however, the people moved out from Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran.”

Dennis Cole: The Paran Wilderness was the goal of the first phase of the journey (**10:11**), and from that area the spies were to be sent to explore the Promised Land (**13:3**).

Ronald Allen: At last, the destination of the grand march was achieved. The Desert of Paran was the staging area for the attack on the land of Canaan. Despite numerous terrible events that marred the dream of the triumphal march, at last the people were at their destination. Now was the time for regrouping, for reconnaissance and evaluation, for placing strategy in place, and for mounting the assault of victory over the Canaanite peoples. Yes, there had been troubled times on the journey. But glory awaits. Or at least that is what should have been the case.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Are you content with how God has gifted you and with the role God has assigned you in Christian ministry?
- 2) Does this passage give you pause regarding speaking against those whom God has placed in positions of spiritual authority?

3) How quick are you to defend yourself against criticism and lash out against those who might unjustly attack you?

4) How have you found God in your own life to manifest the balance between His mercy and His justice?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Duguid: In the last study we looked at an outbreak of grumbling in the midst of God’s people—a sin that we said would never be included as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, but one that nonetheless had deadly consequences. Many of those who grumbled lost their lives as God judged them for their sin and as Moses, who was himself caught up in their sin, failed to intercede for them. You might think that a series of events like that would have such a sobering effect on the community at large that no one would dream of grumbling about anything, at least for a while. Unfortunately, that was not the case. As the philosopher **Hegel** once astutely observed, “**The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.**” He could have been writing the epitaph of Old Testament Israel—and perhaps our epitaph as well. The reality for us is that we too often fail to apply the life lessons with which the Scripture presents us, only recognizing our mistakes after we have made them yet again. . .

What more do we need to learn about the sin of grumbling? Here in **Numbers 12**, though the sin is the same, the dynamics of grumbling are different. The occasion for the grumbling in **chapter 11** was the difficulty of life in the desert. When life was hard for Israel, the temptation was to idealize the “good old days” of the past and then to complain about the present. The root of their grumbling at those times was unbelief that doubted the reality of the future promises of God and despised the goodness of the present provision of God. In this case, however, Miriam and Aaron grumbled not because they compared their present to an imagined golden past but because they compared their situation to that of someone else, in this case Moses. The root of their sin was not so much unbelief as it was envy.

Like grumbling, envy is an underrated sin today. Grumbling is perhaps our national pastime, but envy is the motor that drives our economy. Many television commercials work because they stir up envy in our hearts. We are encouraged to envy our neighbors’ car, our neighbors’ house, even things as trivial as the fluffiness of our neighbors’ towels—which is, of course, due to their using the right fabric softener. We are constantly urged to envy anything our neighbor has that we don’t. In our culture the commandment is no longer “Thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbor” but rather “Thou shalt covet everything thy neighbor has, and thou shalt acquire as much of it as thy credit cards will permit.” Envy is no longer viewed as a sin but as a civic virtue.

Miriam and Aaron were sucked into grumbling through the path of envy. They set themselves and their situation side by side with that of Moses and found cause for complaint. Miriam was the chief instigator in this sin. Her name is listed first, and the Hebrew verb used at the beginning of **Numbers 12** is feminine. Once again, though, grumbling proved to be contagious. Aaron too was caught up in the sin of grumbling along with his sister. . .

If the cure for grumbling rooted in unbelief is faith, then the antidote for grumbling rooted in envy is contentment. Contentment is not a naive closing of the eyes to the difficulties that face you in your situation. Rather it is a solid assessment of who you are in Jesus Christ and a sure confidence that, no matter how difficult your life may be, it comes to you personally from the hand of your sovereign heavenly Father. . .

What is the cure for the grumbling that flows from envy? It is the cross. There God paid the price for your unworthy soul and for mine. There he purchased us back to be his servants, weak and feeble though we are. When we contemplate the greatness of his grace to us in the cross, we cannot doubt that he has our best interests at heart in the way he has brought our circumstances together, even though they are different from the circumstances of others around us. If God did not spare his own Son but freely gave him up for us, then what do we really think he is holding back from us (see **Romans 8:32**)? If you have been grumbling against others, come before God and freely confess your sin. Ask Jesus Christ to intercede for you with the Father. He will bring your case before the throne of God himself, and God will hear him and answer his pleas for you. Remember God's grace to you at the cross. Let that remembrance transform your perspective on your situation into a fresh contentment with God's plan for your life and a new determination to submit yourself to the direction of his Word, fully and completely.

Ronald Allen: Miriam is grand. She preserved the life of the helpless infant who later became the great Moses, servant of Yahweh (see **Exod 1**). She made it possible for Moses' true mother to become his nurse when he was adopted into the harem of Pharaoh in Egypt. She led the singing of the first psalm we find recoded in the Scriptures, the Song of Miriam (**Exod 15**) – the praise of the people of God celebrating their deliverance from the army of Egypt at the Sea of Reeds. Again, it is not because Miriam is a woman that she is presented in this chapter in an unfavorable light; it is precisely because she is such a magnificent person in the history of salvation that her act of rebellion is recorded.

Mattoon: Moses had an excellent spirit. He walked with God and had God's power upon his life, yet, he is still being criticized. Excellence does not give you immunity from criticism, especially spiritual excellence. Christ was the epitome of perfection, but was still maligned and criticized by men. Criticism is going to come, even if you serve the Lord. It will come especially from carnal Christians and unsaved people. (cf **2 Ti 3:12, Jn 17:14, 1 Pe 4:12-13**). Some of the most painful criticisms will come from those who are closest to us, family and friends.

Matthew Henry: The accommodating of this matter, so as that mercy and justice might meet together.

1. Mercy takes place, so far as that Miriam shall be healed; Moses forgives her, and God will. (See **2 Cor. ii. 10.**) But
2. Justice takes place, so far as that Miriam shall be humbled; (**v. 14**). . . that she herself might be made more sensible of her fault, and penitent for it; and that her punishment might be the more public, and all Israel might take notice of it, and take warning by it not to mutiny. If Miriam the prophetess be put under such marks of humiliation for one hasty word spoken against Moses, what may we expect for our murmurings?

Keil: Miriam was the instigator of the open rebellion . . . Aaron followed her, being no more able to resist the suggestions of his sister, than he had formerly been to resist the desire of the people for a golden idol (**Ex. xxxii.**). . .

Are not we – the high priest Aaron, who brings the rights of the congregation before Jehovah in the Urim and Thummim (**Ex. xxviii. 30**), and the prophetess Miriam (**Ex. xv. 20**) – also organs and mediators of divine revelation? “They are proud of the prophetic gift, which ought rather to have fostered modesty in them. But such is the depravity of human nature, that they not only abuse the gifts of God towards the brother whom they despise, but by an ungodly and sacrilegious glorification extol the gifts themselves in such a manner as to hide the Author of the gifts” (**Calvin**).

TEXT: Numbers 13:1-33

TITLE: *NOW YOU ARE GOING TO DOUBT ME? THE REPORT OF THE SPIES*

BIG IDEA:

DENYING GOD’S ASSURANCE OF VICTORY IN THE FACE OF HIS TRACK RECORD OF FAITHFULNESS DEMONSTRATES A SURPRISING FAILURE OF FAITH

INTRODUCTION:

Israel is finally positioned to enter the Promised Land and begin to take possession of all that God had promised to Abraham and the patriarchs. Yes, there would be significant enemies to conquer and drive out of the land. Yes, there would be difficult battles to fight. But the Lord had already given assurance of victory. I like the hymn “**All the Way** my Savior Leads Me” – not just “**Half the Way . . .**” So the scouts are sent out and complete their assessment mission and report back. All agree on the facts they had observed. But only Caleb and Joshua interpreted those facts through the **eyes of faith**. God is the one who had promised to show favor and grant victory. The reconnaissance should never have been about advocating a “Go” vs. “No Go” approach. It should only have been about gathering data to help them make the best strategic decisions as they went about taking possession of the land God had promised to them. This passage teaches us about persevering in faith on the pathway to the victory God has promised as we face extreme challenges.

Gordon Wenham: Twelve tribal leaders are selected to go from Paran (3; cf. 10:11–36) and spy out (2) the land of Canaan. Their job is described more fully in verses 17–20: they were to bring back a report on the quality of the land and the morale of its inhabitants (cf. Josh. 2; Judg. 18). From Deuteronomy 1:22 it seems that the purpose of the mission was to strengthen the Israelites’ faith, not to bring back tactical information. The list of tribal leaders (4–15) given here is quite different from those found elsewhere in Numbers (chs. 1–2; 7). Maybe on occasions such as the census and the dedication of the altar the most senior leader from each tribe represented his tribe, while for the more energetic task of spying younger leaders were chosen.

Timothy Ashley: All the preparations of chs. 1–10 are now to be brought to bear for the first real foray into the promised land. . . The great rebellion at the climax of the spy narrative is related to the previous rebellions against Moses and Yahweh in chs. 11 and 12. The first ten chapters of Numbers are positive in tone, setting forth God’s plans for his people on the march. The human response to God’s revelation here in the wilderness is rebellion, just as it had been at Sinai. The change of venue from Sinai to the wilderness does not bring a change in the rebellious human heart. . .

The magnitude of the rebellion meant that the whole generation would die in the wilderness and that the fulfillment of God’s promise would be delayed by an entire generation. This judgment is finished at the end of ch. 25 with the death of the last of

the rebellious generation in a plague. The census of **ch. 26** signals a new starting point, and the fact that a new generation is discussed at all in **Num. 14** (after some negotiation between Moses and Yahweh) is a mark of God's grace. The old generation will indeed die out in the wilderness rather than being eradicated immediately (only the ten faithless spies die immediately, **14:37**). The promise of God will still be fulfilled.

J. Ligon Duncan: As we come to this chapter, we recognize that certain decisions are of pivotal, epochal significance in the life of the people of God. Certain decision points in history play out for generations to come, and this is one of those decision points to which Israel came and made the wrong decision. It's interesting how biblical writers lament what the children of Israel do in **Numbers 13**, way, way into the Old Testament. I mean, Moses' final sermon to the people of God in Deuteronomy refers to the mistake made right here, but so does the psalmist. Hundreds of years later as the psalmists are writing, they're still thinking about this terrific mistake that was made by the people of God: They came up, they saw overwhelming circumstances, and they forgot the promises and the sovereignty of God; and they rebelled against His leadership, and they fell prey to unbelief...and the rest, as we say, is history. Who knows what the entry into the land of Canaan would have been like had **Numbers 13** never happened. We'll never know, will we, because of this failure. . .

The spies, even as they realistically assess the challenge that was before Israel to go into the land of Canaan were not to forget four things: God's promise; God's faithfulness; God's generosity; and, God's power. Even as they came back and gave a realistic, accurate, faithful assessment of what they saw, the good and the bad, the scary and the encouraging, they were not to give that assessment without remembering those four things—and Moses beats that into your head in a variety of ways in this passage.

- 1) The first part is in **verses 1-16**. In that part, Moses reminds you of God's promises.
- 2) Then, in **verses 17-22**, Moses (in the second part) reminds you of God's faithfulness.
- 3) Then, in the third part, in **verses 23-27**, he reminds you of God's generosity, which in and of itself is to drive you back to the acknowledgement that everything comes from God. All blessings come from Him. What do we sing in *The Doxology*? "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."
- 4) And then, fourth and finally, in **verses 28-33**, he reminds you of God's power and God's sovereignty.

I. (:1-24) RECONAISSANCE OF THE SPIES – DEFINE YOUR MISSION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FAITH

Iain Duguid: The goal of their mission was not to decide whether entering the land was possible or desirable: the Lord had already reminded Israel that this was the land he was

giving to them (13:1). All they had to do was receive it as a gift. Nonetheless, any major military undertaking requires good intelligence so that the best strategy can be evaluated. God's promise did not eliminate the need for responsible action.

Brueggemann: The rebellion in this account did not consist in sending the scouts in to explore Canaan, for God had assigned this sortie (13:1). The problem was that they undertook the mission in unbelief and made their report in rebellion.

A. (:1-16) Commissioning the Spies (One Per Tribe) Per the Lord's Command

1. (:1-3) General Instructions

a. (:1-2) Command by the Lord

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, 2 'Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers' tribes, every one a leader among them.'"

b. (:3) Execution by Moses

"So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran at the command of the LORD, all of them men who were heads of the sons of Israel."

2. (:4-16a) Specific Names

(:4a) *"These then were their names:"*

a. (:4b) Tribe of Reuben

"from the tribe of Reuben, Shammua the son of Zaccur;"

b. (:5) Tribe of Simeon

"from the tribe of Simeon, Shaphat the son of Hori;"

c. (:6) Tribe of Judah

"from the tribe of Judah, Caleb the son of Jephunneh;"

d. (:7) Tribe of Issachar

"from the tribe of Issachar, Igal the son of Joseph;"

e. (:8) Tribe of Ephraim

"from the tribe of Ephraim, Hoshea the son of Nun;"

f. (:9) Tribe of Benjamin

"from the tribe of Benjamin, Palti the son of Raphu;"

g. (:10) Tribe of Zebulun

"from the tribe of Zebulun, Gaddiel the son of Sodi;"

h. (:11) Tribe of Manasseh

*“from the tribe of Joseph,
from the tribe of Manasseh, Gaddi the son of Susi;”*

i. (:12) Tribe of Dan

“from the tribe of Dan, Ammiel the son of Gemalli;”

j. (:13) Tribe of Asher

“from the tribe of Asher, Sethur the son of Michael;”

k. (:14) Tribe of Naphtali

“rom the tribe of Naphtali, Nahbi the son of Vophsi;”

l. (:15) Tribe of Gad

“from the tribe of Gad, Geuel the son of Machi.”

(:16a) Summary Statement

“These are the names of the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land;”

3. (:16b) Renaming of Hoshea as Joshua

“but Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Joshua.”

MacArthur: For reasons not made clear, Moses changed the name of Hoshea, meaning “*desire for salvation,*” to Joshua, meaning “*the Lord is salvation.*”

B. (:17-20) Charging the Spies to Gather Specific Intelligence

1. (:17) Location to Cover

“When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, ‘Go up there into the Negev; then go up into the hill country.’”

2. (:18) Overall Mission = Scope out the Land and the People

a. Scope out the Land

“And see what the land is like,”

b. Scope out the People

1) Regarding Strength

“and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak,”

2) Regarding Numbers

“whether they are few or many.”

Timothy Ashley: Moses then charged the spies to bring back detailed information that would be useful in military operations to conquer the land, and, beyond that, in settling in it. Whether the people were strong enough to defend their cities, whether the land would support the invading armies of Israel, whether the dwellings of the inhabitants of

Canaan were in unfortified camps or in walled cities, all these facts would be important in drawing plans for the forthcoming conquest.

3. (:19-20) Specific Data to Gather

a. (:19a) State of the Land

“And how is the land in which they live, is it good or bad?”

b. (:19b) Condition of the Cities

“And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications?”

c. (:20a) Agricultural Prospects

“And how is the land, is it fat or lean?”

d. (:20b) Forestry Prospects

“Are there trees in it or not?”

e. (:20c) Sample of Fruit

*“Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land.’
Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.”*

C. (:21-24) Conducting the Mission

1. (:21) Scope of the Mission

“So they went up and spied out the land from the wilderness of Zin as far as Rehob, at Lebo-hamath.”

2. (:22) Significance of the Residents of Hebron

a. Descendants of Anak

“When they had gone up into the Negev, they came to Hebron where Ahiman, Sheshai and Talmi, the descendants of Anak were.”

Gordon Wenham: Though Anak was probably a genuine clan name, *ʿānāq* in Hebrew also means neck, and this group were famed for their height (cf. **33**). . . It may well be significant that the narrative devotes so much attention to Hebron. It was near Hebron that God first promised Abraham that he would inherit the land (**Gen. 13:14–18**). It was from that area that he set out to defeat the coalition of kings (**Gen. 14:13ff.**). It was in Hebron that he acquired his only piece of real estate for the burial of his wife, and where he and the other patriarchs were buried (**Gen. 23; 25:9; 35:27–29; 50:13**). The narrator knew these traditions, and he assumes the spies did and that the reader does. It is essential that they be borne in mind as the rest of the story unfolds.

Raymond Brown: Those twelve spies were on ground hallowed by memories of God’s faithfulness. Here the patriarchs had lived and loved, walked and worshipped, believed and obeyed. They too had faced difficult and demanding experiences. Life had been far from easy for any of them, but God had seen them through. At one time or another, they

had made huge mistakes and had let God down, but the Lord had not failed them. This very countryside offered its own rich testimony to the Lord's unchanging faithfulness. Surely, in such honoured territory, the spies would be encouraged that the Lord who had helped their forebears would not fail them.

b. Background of Hebron

"(Now Hebron was built seven years before Zoan in Egypt.)"

3. (:23-24) Sample Cluster of Grapes

a. (:23) Gathering Sample Fruit

"Then they came to the valley of Eshcol and from there cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes; and they carried it on a pole between two men, with some of the pomegranates and the figs."

b. (:24) Giving the Valley a Memorable Name

"That place was called the valley of Eshcol, because of the cluster which the sons of Israel cut down from there."

Eschol means "cluster"

Raymond Brown: Here is another important dimension as we face an uncertain future. We must look not only back for assurance but around us for evidence in our lives of his sovereign guidance, unchanging presence and providential care. Abundant clusters of fruit in our everyday lives encourage us to believe that the Lord who has brought us so far will not disappoint us in the days to come, however difficult they may be. When threatened by imminent change we feel hesitant, insecure, vulnerable and even bewildered, but we must look carefully around at our present scene and itemize the 'clusters' from our contemporary experience. If we take a trip to our own Cluster Valley, we are likely to find abundant evidence of God's unfailing generosity. These present tokens of his providential care need to be gratefully transposed into items for thanksgiving and praise. The God who is meeting our present needs will not deny us his future provision.

II. (:25-33) REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE SPIES – COMMIT TO YOUR MISSION WITH THE EYES OF FAITH – NOT WITH THE MENTALITY OF GRASSHOPPERS

A. (:25-29) Intelligence Report from the Information Gathering Mission

1. (:25-26) Completion of the Assigned Mission

a. (:25) Duration of the Mission

"When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days,"

Robert Rayburn: In other words, the spies do precisely what they were ordered to do. They traversed the country from south to north, the Desert of Zin lying on the southern

frontier, Lebo Hamath on the northern, a distance of some 250 miles, so 500 miles there and back.

- b. (:26a) Accountability for the Mission
“they proceeded to come to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh;”
- c. (:26b) Verbal Report Detailing the Mission
“and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation”
- d. (:26c) Sample Fruit for Show-and-Tell
“and showed them the fruit of the land.”

2. (:27-29) Specific Details of the Report

- a. (:27) Positive General Description of the Land
Thus they told him, and said, ‘We went in to the land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.’”

Gordon Wenham: A hint of the spies’ attitude is given in their very first words. They call Canaan the land to which you sent us; usually when the land is qualified by a relative clause, it is described as the land *‘which the Lord swore to give them’*, or something similar (cf. **13:2; 14:16, 23, 30, 40; 15:2**, etc.).

Dennis Cole: When the scouts returned, they described the land as *good*, describing it as *flowing with milk and honey*, a key phrase used throughout the Old Testament to characterize the quality and productivity of the Promised Land.

- b. (:28-29) Alarming Details Regarding Prospects for Conquering – Magnifying the Difficulties --
 - 1) (:28a) People are Strong
“Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong,”
 - 2) (:28b) Fortified Cities are Difficult to Conquer
“and the cities are fortified and very large;”
 - 3) (:28c-29) Tough Enemies are Entrenched and Difficult to Drive Out
“and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there.”
 - a) Amalek
“Amalek is living in the land of the Negev”

Brueggemann: They descended from Amalek, the offspring of Eliphaz son of Esau by the concubine Timna (**Gen 36:12**). They ranged across nearly the entire Exodus route (**14:25**). They attacked Israel at Rephidim on the way to Sinai (**Exod 17:8–16**) and kept attacking stragglers all the way through the wilderness (**Deut 25:17–19**). Saul tried unsuccessfully to destroy them, and Samuel had to finish off their king, Agag (**1 Sam 15**). David decisively defeated them (**1 Sam 30:17–19**), leaving only remnants at Mount Seir in Transjordan, who were wiped out during Hezekiah’s reign (**1 Chr 4:41–43**).

b) Hittites and Jebusites and Amorites

“and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country,”

Brueggemann:

Hittites. These were an originally non-Semitic people of Asia Minor (1650–1200 bc), some of whom had settled in Canaan (**Van Seters** 1975:45–46; **Josh 1:4; Ezek 16:3**). Some lived in the Hebron region, possibly ruling there (**Gen 23:3**).

Jebusites. These were descendants of Canaan’s third son (**Gen 10:16**). They were the original inhabitants of Jebus/Jerusalem (**Josh 18:28; Judg 19:10; 1 Chr 11:4**) and were there for most of the Bronze Age (2000–1550 bc). They survived Israelite raids until David took the city as his own, allowing survivors to remain in the city (**Josh 15:63; Judg 1:8; 2 Sam 5:5–9**).

Amorites. They had entered Canaan from Mesopotamia (**Liverani** 1973), where they had established powerful dynasties in the early second millennium bc; for example, Hammurabi was an Amorite. In Akkadian, Amurru means “west,” and by the mid-third millennium the term designated the West-Semitic herdsmen and their territory on the Syrian steppes west of the Euphrates (**Van Seters** 1975:43–45). By the eighteenth century, Mari texts speak of them in central Syria. Fourteenth and thirteenth century Egyptian and Mesopotamian correspondence (the Amarna letters) defines their area as stretching from the Mediterranean to the Orontes and to Canaan on the south. In the annals of Sennacherib, the kings of the Amurru were those of Phoenicia, Philistia, Ammon, Edom, and Moab (**ANET** 287), so the Babylonians called the whole land Amurru. Like “Canaanite,” “Amorite” ended up serving as a general term for the populace of Canaan during the Bronze Age (**Gen 14:7; 48:22; Deut 3:8**).

c) Canaanites

“and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.”

Brueggemann: They lived along the sea coast and in the Jordan Valley and gave their name to the whole area (**Milgrom** 1989:119; **Van Seters** 1975:46–51). The term “Canaanite” could refer to any inhabitant of the province stretching from Egypt’s own border to the Hittite border on the Orontes, i.e., Lebo-hamath (e.g., **Gen 12:6; 50:11**), or to one of the various peoples living there. It’s impossible to establish their origins,

whether they descended from ancient inhabitants of the region or migrated from elsewhere, and if so, when this migration occurred. The diversity of opinion and their uncertain origins complicates any effort to identify them with the Canaan that Noah cursed after the flood (**Gen 9:25**); however, the Genesis record seems to point in that direction (**Gen 10:6**) and thus provides a rationale for why Israel should dispossess the Canaanites from their lands. See **Millard 1973** and **Schoville 1994**. Later the term came to refer to “merchants” (**Prov 31:24; Zech 14:21**).

Gordon Wenham: These first-hand details about the residents of the land gave the spies’ report a touch of authority, and no doubt helped to convince the people of the impossibility of its conquest. But at the same time they obliquely, but totally, challenged the divine promises. Up to this point the phrase a land flowing with milk and honey has always been coupled with the promise that God would give the land and its inhabitants, often listed as here, to Israel (**Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev. 20:24**). The spies question this conclusion. They look on the presence of these other nations as an insurmountable obstacle to entry, not as a confirmation of God’s purpose.

Dennis Cole: the first part of their report focused on matters related to the land and its productivity, followed by matters related to the people and their military capabilities. Their accounting of the quality of the land was a faithful representation of that which they had seen and partaken from the regions into which they had been sent. It was indeed an exceptionally fertile land, worthy of being described as “*flowing with milk and honey.*” But as quickly as they gloried over the produce of the land, they began to grumble about the power of the people of the land. The solemn report turned sour; the wondrous picture turned piteous; the glorifying words became gloomy.

B. (:30-33) Two Contrasting Recommendations Regarding Prospects of Conquering Canaan

David Guzik: Unbelief often presents itself as being “factual” or “practical” or “down to earth.” Yet, the most factual, practical, and down to earth thing we can do is trust the word of the living God. Their unbelief was not according to the facts, but despite the facts.

Significantly, two men could see the exact same sights – the same grapes, the same men, the same land, the same cities – one can come away singing in faith, and the other is filled with a sense of certain doom. Ultimately, faith or unbelief does not spring from circumstances or environment, but from our hearts, which God must change.

1. (:30) Positive Recommendation – Overcomer Mentality of Faith = Victory is Assured

“Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, ‘We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we shall surely overcome it.’”

Roy Gane: Isn't it unrealistic to say, "We can certainly do it"? Caleb knows what the inhabitants and fortifications of Canaan are like because, unlike most Israelites, he has seen them. He is aware that his people lack the personnel, resources, infrastructure, and budget to overcome the obstacles on their own. But when Caleb says, "We can certainly do it," he includes God in the word "*we*" because the Lord is with his people. "Faith is the grit in the soul that puts the dare into dreams" . . .

Theocracy, not majority, rules Caleb's heart. Democracy may apply to other kinds of situations, but not even a landslide vote shakes his dogged determination to follow the Lord. . .

In the opposing attitudes of Caleb versus the ten scouts, we see two basic orientations that are exemplified throughout the Bible: faith in the Lord to overcome impossible odds versus lack of belief that makes people think they must save themselves. Faith is courage that conquers. Disbelief is cowardice that correctly assesses the impossibility of a situation but fails to take God into account, thereby snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory. . .

For the person of faith, obstacles are temporary because God is real. For the disbeliever, obstacles are permanent because God is not real enough. Thus, the key to exegesis of exigencies is an existential question: Is God real to me? Do I believe, act, and live as if he is alive?

Brueggemann: Believers today need to stir up the same sentiments: If we think ourselves weak, we should know that God's power works best through unpretentious human weakness (**2 Cor 12:9**). Because our Lord Jesus has defeated all powers (**Col 2:15**), we can be strong in his power (**Eph 6:10–13**), joining in his victorious rule (**Rev 3:21**).

Robert Rayburn: The life of faith is often marked by intense struggle and frequent failure. But there is struggle precisely because faith knows and cares what it is and ought to be. Faith never forgets that God has made a promise of Canaan. Faith reckons with all that the Lord has already done in redemption and fatherly care and love so far through the wilderness of this world. Faith wants a Godward perspective always and only. Faith desires always to speak and to act in the full realization of God's presence, power, and promise. That was *not* true of these ten scouts; it was true of the two. It is the one conspicuous and obvious difference between these two groups of men.

I doubt very much that Joshua and Caleb didn't have moments of doubt when looking at the thick and high walls of the cities of Canaan and when looking up to men much taller and more imposing than themselves. But they dealt with themselves, and when push came to shove they knew what faith should think and say and should do and they thought it and they said it and they did it. They wouldn't invariably do that; they will stumble like everyone else, but they did it when it mattered most when the issue was being joined and they did it regularly enough to demonstrate that their faith was the real thing, the genuine article. They had a God-ward perspective and they acted on God's

presence, power and promise. True faith always does.

J. Ligon Duncan: They magnified the problems, and they minimized the power of God, when what they should have done is not minimize the problems, but embrace the impossibility of those problems in terms of their own power, and at the same time acknowledge and magnify the power of God to overcome all.

2. (:31-33) Negative Recommendation – Grasshopper Mentality of Disbelief = We are Going to be Crushed

- a. (:31) Conclusion = Impossible Task – Viewed Apart from Faith
“But the men who had gone up with him said, ‘We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.’”
- b. (:32-33) Supporting Arguments
“So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying,”

Timothy Ashley: The contrast between faith and the lack of faith comes out clearly, even here at the beginning, in the word used to describe the majority interpretation of the reconnaissance mission. It is called an evil report (*dibbâ*). This term contains within it the idea of negativity, falsehood, and strife.

- 1) (:32b) Tough Place to Wage War
“The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants;”
- 2) (:32c) Enemy = Giants Compared to Our Size
“and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.”
- 3) (:33a) Legendary Nephilim Would Oppose Us
“There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim);”

Gordon Wenham: Caleb’s attempt to calm the people and rekindle their faith in the promises (go up, occupy, Hebrew *’ālâ, yāraš* are key words in **Exod. 3:8, 17; 33:3** and **Lev. 20:24**) is immediately rebuffed by the other spies with more outrageous misrepresentation (**31–33**). This time their words are dubbed an evil report, that means not simply that they describe the land as evil, but that their accusations about it are untrue (cf. *tev* ‘false report’). They claim it ‘eats’ its inhabitants (**32**), that is they tend to die due to the hostile environment (**Lev. 26:38; Ezek. 36:13**). For a similar personification of the land, cf. Leviticus 18:25, 28. Finally, they revert to the tall men, the sons of Anak, whom they describe with fantastic hyperbole as Nephilim, that is the demi-gods who lived on earth before the flood (**Gen. 6:4**).

Timothy Ashley: The spies connect these tall men with the Nephilim. These creatures

were, at least in part, the “mighty men” (*gibbôrîm*) resulting from the union between the “sons of God” and the daughters of men in that difficult and tantalizing passage, **Gen. 6:1–4**. The simplest way to take the text here is that, although the Israelites would not have known who the Anakim were, since Num. 13:22 is the first mention of them in the Bible, they would be familiar with the story of the Nephilim. Connecting the men of great stature with the Nephilim is an exaggeration for rhetorical effect.

4) (:33b) Grasshopper Mentality
*“and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight,
and so we were in their sight.”*

Raymond Brown: Paralysed by fears and plagued by inadequacy, they were totally deficient in self-worth: ‘We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them’ (**33**). Self-doubt is a cruel and crippling emotion. It robs its victims of security, dignity, composure and resourcefulness. If we are to be used by him, we must certainly begin with a realistic assessment of our limitations. Great things are achieved by God’s servants when they are brought to an end of their own slender resources and realize that they have no alternative but to rely totally on his limitless provision. To operate in brash self-confidence is to court disaster; to remain in cowering self-doubt is to distrust God.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) The reconnaissance mission to check out Canaan was initiated by the Israelites. Why did the Lord sanction it?
- 2) To what extent should the church concern itself with strategy decisions in carrying out the Great Commission?
- 3) For the 10 spies who recommended against invading the land of Canaan, what can you speculate might have been their alternative plan for the large multitude of Israelites?
- 4) How does a grasshopper mentality evidence itself in your life as you face spiritual challenges?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Duguid: Two Reports

At the end of that time the tribal representatives brought their conclusions to Moses and the people. Like many committees, they couldn’t reach a consensus and so returned

with a majority and a minority report. The facts were not at issue between the two sides. Everyone agreed, on the one hand, that the land was fertile and prosperous and, on the other, that its inhabitants were a powerful force to be reckoned with. The key difference between the majority and the minority was where to put the “but” in their report. For the ten-man majority, the defining “but” was the people who inhabited the land. Every part of the land was occupied; all four of the major geographical regions—the Negeb, the hill country, the area beside the sea, and the Jordan valley—had inhabitants who were powerful and lived in large, fortified cities (**13:28 , 29**). There was no uninhabited portion where they might comfortably occupy the land without opposition. They saw the fortifications of the cities, which were indeed substantial. Archaeological explorations suggest that the walls of these cities were thirty to fifty feet high and fifteen feet thick. What is more, the men who lived in the land looked like giants to them, like the Nephilim of old, who were mighty and fearsome warriors (see **Genesis 6:4**). Who could hope to prevail against such opposition? In comparison to these enormous giants, the scouts felt like grasshoppers (**13:33**). Grasshoppers were the smallest edible creature in the ancient world. So we could perhaps render their thoughts into a modern equivalent by translating it as, “We felt like shrimps!”

There was a minority report to be considered as well, however. Joshua and Caleb saw exactly the same sights as the other ten did but drew different conclusions. Caleb blurted out the summary conclusion of their assessment: “*We should definitely go up and take possession of the land, for we are certainly able to do so*” (**13:30**). Joshua gave the expanded version of their report in **chapter 14**. He started out with the basic facts: the land they surveyed was not merely good but “*exceedingly good*” (**14:7**). He didn’t contest the powerful nature of the inhabitants of the land; yet the defining “but” in his report was not the size of the opposition but the presence or absence of God’s favor. If the Lord was pleased with them, he would lead them into the land and give it to them (14:8). Far from the Israelites being at risk of being turned into shrimp cocktail by the Anakites, it was the inhabitants of the land who were on the menu: they would be food (*lehem*) for the Israelites to consume (**14:9**). Their gods could not protect them against the Lord; their shelter was gone (**14:9**). So long as the Israelites did not rebel against the Lord, they had nothing to fear from the inhabitants of the land. . .

Joshua and Caleb, however, looked at precisely the same facts but from the perspective of faith, not unbelief. Joshua’s very name expressed his faith in the Lord. His name at birth was Hoshea, “*salvation*,” but Moses gave him the name Yehoshua or Joshua, “*the Lord saves*”—a small shift, yet a crucial one (**13:16**). It is one thing to have faith in salvation. That may simply represent the generic hope expressed in a thousand Hollywood movies that if you only believe strongly enough, something will turn up at the crucial moment. It may simply be faith in faith, belief in the power of believing. The name Yehoshua, however, expressed the specific hope that at the crucial moment **someone** would turn up. Joshua had faith in the saving presence of the Lord, Israel’s God.

That specific faith in the Lord’s presence and favor with his people was what drove Joshua and Caleb’s interpretation of the facts in front of them. They saw the same

warriors as the majority did, protected by the same city walls, and yet concluded that those pagan nations not only could be but must be defeated. Like David facing Goliath, they saw their opponents according to a true scale. The difference between the majority and the minority reports was simply that the minority included God in their calculation. David saw Goliath not as a giant to be tackled by a small and ill-equipped shepherd boy but as a wild animal who had reared up against the sovereign Lord and would inevitably face the deadly consequences. So too Joshua and Caleb saw the inhabitants of Canaan merely as mighty obstacles that God would inevitably overcome so his purposes could be fulfilled. The Lord who had parted the Red Sea in front of his people would not abandon them now. Giants may seem enormous from the perspective of the shrimps, but comparing them with the power of the Almighty tends to cut them down to size. If you fear the Lord, you will be free from the fear of your enemies; if you forget God, you will inevitably fear men.

Dennis Cole: As readily as Caleb had challenged the people to mount a campaign to conquer the land, the other ten scouts debunked the idea that they could be successful against the formidable foes of Canaan. They used the same terms as Caleb but negated them. Caleb had emphatically said, *“Let us indeed go up ... for we are certainly capable of it.”* But the majority responded with fear and trepidation, *“We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are!”* Their words stood in direct opposition to not only the words of the faithful servant Caleb but against Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and ultimately against God. They renounced God’s promise to accompany them with his awesome presence, to grant them decisive victory in what seemed, humanly speaking, to be overwhelming odds, and henceforth to confer upon them their rightful inheritance as the people of God—a homeland of abundant prosperity. But the full possession of the Promised Land in freedom and fortune was, and would always be, dependent upon the people’s faithfulness.

Their message of apprehension and distrust was disseminated throughout the Israelite camps that surrounded the tabernacle, the central sanctuary and symbol of Yahweh’s faithful presence. Focusing fearfully upon the outward feasibility in the face of the world’s power rather than upon their inward faith in God’s omnipotence, they lost perspective of the boundless possibilities that awaited them. Suddenly all of the peoples of the land were acclaimed to be like that limited group of descendants of the Anakim who were abnormally large. They began to see themselves as lowly insects, as grasshoppers to be stepped upon on the ground or pinched from the stalks of the fields of the land, to be easily beaten by those inhabitants like the giant Nephilim. Like the later Israelites who trembled before the colossal Goliath and the Philistines, until a devoted youth named David stepped forth to answer the challenge, the Israelites saw themselves being consumed rather than being conquerors through their God.

Robert Rayburn: We have in this one verse several excellent illustrations of the constant interweaving of divine sovereignty and human freedom in history. Yahweh was going to give Israel the land so, we might think, what are spies needed for? But the land still had to be taken. Yahweh was going to give Israel the Promised Land but Israel was still going to have to fight for it. Armies need intelligence; tactics are based on it. Poor

intelligence, as we have learned recently in Iraq, can lead to bad tactics. When Israel finally enters the Promised Land we find at first Yahweh directing the army personally; but soon thereafter, Joshua disposes his troops in battle after battle as a wise commander, estimating enemy strength, surveying the terrain, and creating an order of battle.

But there is something more. In **Deuteronomy 1:22-23** the origin of the idea of sending spies is said to have been with the people. Moses is rehearsing the history and writes, *“Then all of you came to me and said, ‘Let us send men ahead to spy out the land for us and bring back a report about the route we are to take and the towns we will come to.’”* Then Moses continues, *“The idea seemed good to me; so I selected twelve of you...”* and so on. There is nothing in the account in Deuteronomy 1 about the Lord telling Moses to send spies into Canaan. Perhaps the simplest way to understand the two accounts together is to conclude that the people proposed the idea, Moses thought it wise, and, when he consulted Yahweh to make sure, the Lord approved the plan. In any case, even here, with the Lord saying to Moses, “Send some men...” there is also a responsible plan on the people’s part, a judgment on Moses’ part before the approval by the Lord, God doing his work in and through the actions of human beings.

Steven Cole: Persevering Faith or Temporary Faith?

In **Numbers 13 & 14**, we meet two men who were “big-godders,” and ten men who were “little-godders.” Israel was on the southern border of Canaan, poised to go into the land. Moses sent these 12 men to spy out the land. Ten came back with a bad report, focusing on the giants in the land. Two came back with a good report, saying, in effect, “We’ll eat those guys for lunch!” But the ten influenced the whole congregation to side with them. They voted to appoint a leader and return to Egypt. As a result, God decreed that they would all die in the wilderness; only their children and the two believing spies would enter the Promised Land. The message for us is that ...

By faith, God wants you to persevere in His promise of salvation and not yield to temptations to unbelief.

1. By faith, God wants you to persevere in His promise of salvation.

The exodus is the Old Testament picture of salvation or redemption. God brought His chosen people out of slavery in Egypt, just as today He brings His chosen people out of bondage to sin. The New Testament reveals that ...

- A. God promises salvation to all who truly believe in Christ.
- B. Those with genuine saving faith persevere, while those with temporary faith turn back to the world.
- C. God’s promises and His power for perseverance are available to all who have trusted in Christ.
- D. If God has saved you, perseverance is not automatic, but requires a fight of faith against difficult adversaries.

2. To persevere in faith, you must overcome strong temptations to unbelief.

A. To persevere in faith, you must realize that unbelief is a terrible sin.

1) UNBELIEF IS A TERRIBLE SIN BECAUSE IT IS THE ROOT OF ALL SINS.

2) UNBELIEF IS A DANGEROUS SIN BECAUSE IT IS DECEPTIVE AND SPREADS EASILY AND QUICKLY.

3) UNBELIEF IS A BLASPHEMOUS SIN BECAUSE IT REJECTS GOD'S SALVATION AND ACCUSES HIM OF CRUELTY, DECEPTION, AND WEAKNESS.

B. To persevere in faith, you must resist the temptation to go along with the majority opinion in the world and sometimes in the church.

C. To persevere in faith, you must resist the temptation to exaggerate your problems and to minimize God's power to keep His promises.

D. To persevere in faith, look at the facts, but put them in the perspective of God's promises and power.

Conclusion

So ask yourself, "Am I a big-godder or a little-godder?" There are giants in this evil world! God calls you to conquer them through persevering faith in His promises and power. As **Hebrews 11:6** affirms, "*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*"

TEXT: Numbers 14:1-38

TITLE: *HOW MUCH COMPLAINING SHOULD GOD PUT UP WITH?*

BIG IDEA:

PERSISTENT COMPLAINING TESTS THE LIMITS OF GOD'S PATIENCE BUT THE APPLICATION OF HIS MERCY AND JUDGMENT PROTECT HIS REPUTATION

INTRODUCTION:

God is not someone to be trifled with. Complaining and grumbling are serious offenses. The authority of His appointed leaders must not be attacked since that is an attack against God Himself. At the end of the day, God must protect His reputation so that His glory is manifested throughout the world. His patience has limits, but His mercy and judgment know no bounds but work together in harmony to accomplish His purposes as He remains faithful to His covenant promises.

Gordon Wenham: Now the rebellion reaches its climax. Appalled by the spies' description of the promised land, the people break down completely. In the Hebrew the verbs pile up in an attempt to express the passions unleashed. They reflect that anything they have experienced up to now will be better than Canaan. The thought moves from Egypt to the wilderness to Canaan and then back to Egypt. Time had already dulled their more bitter memories of Egypt, and in an earlier rebellion they had looked back on it with a certain wistfulness (cf. **11:5, 18, 20**). But this time they actually propose returning to Egypt, thereby completely rejecting the whole plan of redemption. From **Exodus 1** to the mission of the spies there is but one plot: how Israel was brought out of Egypt to the borders of Canaan. Now within sight of their goal they suggest giving it all up. Not only that, they propose electing an alternative leader to Moses, their divinely appointed mediator of salvation. *'Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt!'*

Ronald Allen: The malicious report of the ten spies (**13:26-33**) spread throughout the populace like a vicious virus on rampage. The words of Caleb and Joshua were not heard. Everywhere people heard of walled cities, strong men, giants, and the fabled Nephilim. . . No one talked about God's grace. None recited his miracles. Forgotten was the act of God where the most powerful nation of their world was stymied at the rushing of waters back to their beds. The thunder of Sinai, the fire of God, that he had spoken and delivered and graced his people beyond imagination – all these things were forgotten in their paroxysm of fear. Fear unchecked becomes its own fuel, a self-propelling force that expands as it expends.

I. (:1-10) TRUNCULENT COMPLAINING SPREADS THE CONTAGION OF FEAR AND PANIC --

REFUSING TO LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF REASON AND OF FAITH

A. (:1-4) Rebellion Against God's Appointed Leaders

1. (:1) Self-Pity – Woe is Me

“Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.”

2. (:2a) Community Grumbling

“And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron;”

Dennis Cole: The Israelite community reacted to the majority report with fear and frenzy, discounting totally the credibility of Caleb’s minority report and his visionary challenge to go forth and conquer the land with God’s power and presence. The collective congregation of the tribes of Israel and the accompanying non-Israelite rabble (11:1) now moaned vociferously against the divinely ordained leadership of Moses and Aaron, precipitating an all-night session of weeping and wailing because of their perceived plight. Looking only through the eyes of their human frailty, they felt they had nowhere to turn. They had departed Egypt under dramatic circumstances, but now they somehow thought slavery would be better than facing Canaan, which seemed like a mighty invincible fortress, or simply dying in the wilderness.

3. (:2b-3) Irrational Despair – Abandoning Reason

“and the whole congregation said to them,”

a. (:2b) Preferring Prior Death

*“Would that we had died in the land of Egypt!
Or would that we had died in this wilderness!”*

C.H.M.: Are not we, too, like Israel, prone to look at the difficulties which surround us, rather than at that blessed One who has undertaken to carry us right through them all and bring us safely into His own everlasting kingdom? Why is it we are sometimes cast down? Why do we mourn? Wherefore are the accents of discontent and impatience heard in our midst, rather than the songs of praise and thanksgiving? Simply because we allow circumstances to shut out God, instead of having God as a perfect covering for our eyes and a perfect object for our hearts.

b. (:3) Preferring Egyptian Bondage

“And why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?”

Dennis Cole: The intensity of the lament was heightened further by their stated preference for a return to Egypt, where they might have preferred to die in a state of subjection and oppression. The very people who had seen firsthand the marvelous and miraculous demonstration of God’s omnipotence against one of the most powerful nations of the second millennium B.C.. now longed to return to a world of bondage rather than believe a word of blessing. The sinful human tendency, even among Christians, to lapse back into the addictive ways of sin and despair after having seen the outward demonstration of God’s working on their behalf was evidenced in this setting.

Often in a state of rebellion against God, one loses the benefit of spiritual mooring, whereby wisdom and discernment become elusive and proper decision making is made extremely difficult. Worry and fear dominate one's thought patterns. The Israelites had thus renounced and rejected God's beneficence, by now suggesting that a return to Egypt would be a good thing rather than marching into a land that even the cynical scouts deemed as good. Further evidence of their stupefaction can be seen in the statement in v. 3, where they suggested that God might have led them into the desert to die. They made the God of life and hope to be one of death and despair.

4. (:4) Foolish Decision Making – Abandoning Faith

*“So they said to one another,
‘Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.’”*

B. (:5-10a) Rejection of the Voices of Reason and of Faith

1. (:5) Sober Reminder of the Fear of God

“Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly of the congregation of the sons of Israel.”

Gordon Wenham: To fall on one's face is the Old Testament's ultimate mark of religious worship and awe (**Gen. 17:3; Lev. 9:24**). But in Numbers it usually anticipates some great act of judgment (cf. **16:4, 22, 45; 20:6**). Moses and Aaron, sensing the presence of God, fall to the ground in fear at what he is about to do.

2. (:6-9) Last Chance to Listen to the Voices of Reason and of Faith

a. (:6) Joshua and Caleb Get the People's Attention

*“And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh,
of those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes;”*

Dennis Cole: At this point in the narrative Joshua chimes in and corroborates the positive witness of Caleb regarding the exceeding goodness of the land they had scouted and the powerlessness of the peoples of the land before the faithful people of God. The reminder that Joshua and Caleb were among the scouts serves the narrative purpose of connecting them with the earlier events—the scouting theme as these two men had witnessed the same land that the other ten had—and of emphasizing their role in the present context. For the first time in the narrative all four of the faithful leaders are mentioned together, and the antithesis between the righteous few (remnant) and the innumerable nation of rebels is heightened.

b. (:7-8) Joshua and Caleb Point to the Lord's Promise

1) (:7) Report of the Land Matches the Lord's Promise

“and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, ‘The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land.’”

2) (:8) Possession of the Land Tied Only to God's Good Pleasure

“If the LORD is pleased with us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us-- a land which flows with milk and honey.”

Timothy Ashley: For Yahweh to give the people success, he must delight (*hāpēs*) in them, which requires that Israel obey him.²⁷ If Yahweh delights in the people he will bring them into the land of Canaan in triumph.

c. (:9) Joshua and Caleb Warn Against Rebellion

1) Don't Rebel Against the Lord

“Only do not rebel against the LORD;”

2) Don't Fear the People of the Land

*“and do not fear the people of the land,
for they shall be our prey.*

*Their protection has been removed from them,
and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.”*

3. (:10a) Angry Rejection of God's Faithful Messengers

“But all the congregation said to stone them with stones.”

Gordon Wenham: This is not simply a mob-lynching (cf. **Exod. 17:4; 1 Kgs 12:18**). The congregation had judicial authority, and stoning was reserved for the punishment of major religious crimes (e.g. **Lev. 20:2, 27; 24:23; Num. 15:36; Deut. 13:10**) and sins within the family which symbolize breaches of the covenant (**Deut. 21:21; 22:21, 24**). Joshua and Caleb have accused them of rebelling against the Lord (9); the congregation rejects this charge as false and proposes to exact the appropriate penalty for false witness.

Timothy Ashley: **Wenham** posits that the people's reaction here is a **judicial reaction** to what they perceive as false witness on the part of Joshua and Caleb.³⁵ But two points tell against this explanation. First, it is doubtful that their words do not rebel (*'al-timrōdû*, v. 9) in the jussive may be taken as false witness. Second, although the Torah forbids false witness (**Exod. 20:16; 23:1; Deut. 5:17** [Eng. 20]) the punishment for it is set forth only in Deuteronomy and is a talion, i.e., doing to the false witness what he had planned for the accused (**Deut. 19:16–21**); no punishment of stoning is set forth. Therefore, the reaction of the crowd here is more likely to be a reaction of anger than a perceived judicial sentence.

C. (:10b) Revelation of the Glory of God -- What Happens When God Shows Up?

“Then the glory of the LORD appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.”

Dennis Cole: At pivotal points in the Bible, when humanity's sinful rebellion reached an uncontrollable crisis, God would intervene through wondrous means to demonstrate his power and glory, and then manifest his justice and grace by endeavoring to draw his

crowning creation back to himself. From Noah and Abraham, to Moses and Elijah, and finally and incomparably in Jesus, the story of his redemptive power has resonated through his word to challenge those whom he desires to call his own to faith and fulfillment. But redemption often was prefaced by judgment, so from the cloud of the Lord's presence came the revelation that God intended to ravage the Israelite nation with plague and destruction and rebuild a new and greater kingdom through Moses. This potential of starting over through Moses had been raised by Yahweh when the people constructed the golden calf soon after the Exodus (**Exod 32:10**). . .

This is the pivotal point of the narrative, for here God intervenes and interacts with his appointed leaders.

II. (:11-25) TENSE CONFRONTATION REGARDING THE LIMITS OF GOD'S PATIENCE – MERCY AND JUDGMENT APPLIED IN RESPONSE TO THE EFFECTUAL INTERCESSION OF MOSES

A. (:11-12) Time for Dramatic Judgment – The Last Straw

1. (:11) Patience of God Severely Tested

*“And the LORD said to Moses,
‘How long will this people spurn Me?
And how long will they not believe in Me,
despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?’”*

Gordon Wenham: Though words for faith and belief in God are fairly rare in the Old Testament, that man must exercise faith in God and his word is a fundamental presupposition of all the writers. To believe in God means to accept all he says and to act accordingly: to trust his promises and obey his commands. Faith makes a man to be counted righteous before God (**Gen. 15:6**): its absence damns him (cf. **Num. 20:12**). In this instance God proposes destroying Israel and starting afresh with Moses and his descendants (**12**).

2. (:12) Proposed Severe Judgment and Redirected Blessing

*“I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them,
and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they.”*

Raymond Brown: ‘*Striking with a plague*’ was reminiscent of his judgment upon the obdurate Egyptians. The Lord was proposing to start his plan of salvation history all over again with a fresh line and a new people. Caleb and Joshua had not succeeded with the people. Moses hoped that he might plead effectively with God. Three issues were uppermost in the mind of this compassionate intercessor.

- He was jealous for God's glory (**13–16**),
- committed to God's word (**17**) and
- mindful of God's love (**18–19**).

- It is persistent love. He is slow to anger (18). They had repeatedly tried his patience (22), but he kept on loving them, even at a time of widespread defection at Canaan's border.
- It is generous love. Overflowing with compassion and abounding in love (18), God refused to put limits on his love simply because, at times, they did not appear to love him.
- It is reliable love. The word used for love here (*hesed*) is the great term, variously translated and found about 250 times in the Old Testament, for God's covenant or steadfast love, his unfailing faithfulness to his loving agreement with his people, his pledge of total dependability.19
- It is pardoning love, forgiving sin and rebellion. On the grounds of God's great love, the intercessor begged him to 'forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now' (19). That verb 'to forgive' means 'to carry away', like lifting a crippling load from our shoulders forever.
- It is righteous love. 'Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation' (18).

B. (:13-19) Desperate Intercession by Moses

1. (:13-16) Plea Based on God's Glory

a. (:13-14) Wiping Out Israel Would Impugn God's Reputation

"But Moses said to the LORD, 'Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Thy strength Thou didst bring up this people from their midst, 14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that Thou, O LORD, art in the midst of this people, for Thou, O LORD, art seen eye to eye, while Thy cloud stands over them; and Thou dost go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.'"

Dennis Cole: Rhetorically, the threefold use of the second person pronoun in emphatic position echoes Moses' depth of passion in his appeal to God concerning his present and future reputation among the peoples of Egypt and Canaan, saying: **You** are in their midst, **You** appear to them and over them, and **You** go before them day and night. These expressions brilliantly portray the intimacy of the relationship between God and his people, through his abiding presence, his providential protection, and his power. With such mighty deeds renowned among the nations, Moses beseeched the Lord to allow his vengeance to acquiesce to his forgiveness based upon the possibility that defamation might come to his Name. To allow the Israelites to suffer great loss or be annihilated in one fell swoop of vengeance might convey to the nations that Israel's God was unable to bring them into the Promised Land, casting a detrimental reflection on his character rather than on the real problem, an insolent nation. The terminology of

ability here (*yākôl*) reminds the reader of similar usage in the contrasting reports of Caleb (*yākôl nūkal*, “we are surely able”) versus the ten other scouts (*lo’ nūkal*, “we are not able”). The Egyptians would echo the words of the unfaithful spies who were deserving of judgment rather than continue to stand in awe of Yahweh because of his continued miracle working on behalf of his people. God might be seen as unfaithful to his people.

- b. (:15-16) Wiping Out Israel Would Impugn God’s Power
“Now if Thou dost slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Thy fame will say, 16 ‘Because the LORD could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.’”

Iain Duguid: Moses’ prayer of intercession was based on two equally fundamental Scriptural truths: the requirements of **God’s glory** and **God’s merciful nature**. He pleaded for his fellow-Israelites first on the basis of the requirements of God’s glory (**14:13–16**). If the Lord were to blot out the Israelites at this point, the Gentile nations around them would misunderstand his reasons. They had heard that the Lord’s name was linked with this people, that he had brought them out of Egypt, and that he had gone through the wilderness with them. If God were to kill them now, the nations might think it was because he was unable to bring his people into the land, and they would be confirmed in their unbelief. The Lord’s glory might be tarnished.

Second, though, Moses pleaded for the people on the basis of God’s mercy (**14:17–19**). He quoted the Lord’s own description of himself from **Exodus 34:6, 7**: the Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love, and forgiving sin and rebellion, yet not leaving the guilty unpunished. He does not falsify the Scriptural record by only quoting the first half of God’s self-description. On the contrary, Moses acknowledges that the Lord is a God of both justice and of mercy; yet he asks that in accordance with his great *hesed*, the Lord’s covenantal faithfulness to his people, he would be reconciled with them in spite of their continuing record of sin.

Both of these motivations should feature prominently in our own prayers of intercession. Why do we ask God to respond to our prayers? It is “for your name’s sake,” so that he might receive the glory he deserves. Why do we ask him to change our neighbor’s heart toward him? It is so that the Lord might be glorified by another soul captivated by his beauty. Why do we ask him to strengthen our churches and add new people to them? It is so that we might more adequately and fully declare his praises in those places. Why do we ask for victory over our sins? It is so that our hearts might be more free to glorify him and delight in his presence. Praying for the sake of God’s glory will dramatically reshape what we pray for and the way we pray for ourselves and those around us.

What is more, if we ask, motivated by God’s glory, we will also be comforted when he does not answer our prayers in the way we had hoped. If God is more glorified in my continuing weakness, suffering, or even failure, then my prayer has nonetheless been

answered when I remain weak or suffering. If God is more glorified by enabling me to rejoice in him in spite of a door being closed in front of me or a deep longing in my heart going unfulfilled, then my prayer for his glory has been answered. If God is more glorified by my failure than he would be by my success, then my prayer has been answered even when my best endeavors to serve him have been shipwrecked. If God is my servant or my partner, then my failure means that God has let me down. However, if God is my Master who does all things for my good as well as for his glory, then I can know that he has a glorious purpose in even the most inglorious circumstances of my life. It would be perverse indeed for me to pray for something and then complain because God gave it to me wrapped in a different form from the one I had anticipated.

2. (:17-19) Plea Based on God's Loyal Love

a. (:17-18) Loyal Love Consistent with God's Justice

"But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as Thou hast declared, 18 'The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.'"

Dennis Cole: With this foundation laid, Moses takes his entreaty to a second level now based upon God's attributes of long-suffering, faithfulness, loyal love, and forgiveness, while still maintaining the balance with his justice and righteousness. Moses understood that God's strength could be magnified through the balanced application of his attributes to their current situation. On one hand he recalled the words of the Decalogue, which spoke of God's judgment of idolatry lasting to the third and fourth generations of the rebellious, while his loyal love would endure to a thousand generations of the faithful (**Exod 20:5-6**). Additionally, he remembered that Yahweh was a gracious God, who through His compassion, abundant love, and long-suffering could forgive the sinful and rebellious (**Exod 34:6-7**). So often the God of the Old Testament has been presented errantly and misguidedly as a God of wrath and destruction, while asserting that the God of the New Testament in Jesus was one of mercy and love. The present appeal of Moses demonstrates that the opposite was and is true. It furthermore evidences that Moses' understanding of God and his nature had advanced to a level of keen discernment that can only come as a result of an intimate relationship with him.

J. A. Thompson: *Steadfast love* (Heb. *Hesed*) is a peculiarly significant word expressing the qualities of loyalty, faithfulness and steadfastness which are to be found in One who is true to His covenant and to His obligations. It occurs about 250 times in the OT with strong overtones of the loyalty and the commitment to one another of the parties to a covenant.

b. (:19) Loyal Love Consistent with Pattern of Forgiveness Already Established in History

"Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Thy lovingkindness, just as Thou also hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

C. (:20-25) Forgiveness Granted but Without Compromising God's Glory

1. (:20) Announcement of Pardon

“So the LORD said, ‘I have pardoned them according to your word;’”

2. (:21) Proclamation of Glory

“but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the LORD.”

3. (:22-24) Disposition of the Land Promise

a. (:22-23) Removal of the Blessing of Possession of the Land from the Unfaithful

“Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs, which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, 23 shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it.”

Gordon Wenham: Typical of the irony in this story, their punishment is made to fit their crime. They wanted to die in the wilderness and return to Egypt: in a way rather different from the one they intended, God grants their request. The long-term programme of entering Canaan will be postponed to let the generation of rebels die where they wanted.

Timothy Ashley: The Levites are also not to be counted in the number of those who murmured and spurned Yahweh (v. 23). This conclusion is probable for two reasons. First, Eliezar (Aaron's son and successor) was probably over twenty years old at the first census, and he survived to enter Canaan (cf. **Josh. 14:1; 17:4; 20:24, 33**). Second, and more importantly, the Levites are exempted from the punishment because they were not involved in the general census of **ch. 1**, but were set over against Israel and given their own censuses in **chs. 3–4**, with different age ranges than from twenty years of age and up.

b. (:24) Promise of the Blessing of Possession of the Land to Faithful Caleb

“But My servant Caleb, because he has had a different spirit and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land which he entered, and his descendants shall take possession of it.”

4. (:25) Instructions to Begin Their Wilderness Wanderings

“Now the Amalekites and the Canaanites live in the valleys; turn tomorrow and set out to the wilderness by the way of the Red Sea.”

Brueggemann: Thus far, the movement had always been toward the Promised Land. But now God had them turn around and get away from the land he was going to give them: “set out for the wilderness” (**14:25**). God warned that he had heard their complaints and

wondered how long they would continue (14:27). Elsewhere in the book when God “hears” of sinful behavior, it is a precursor to judgment. In this case, too, the Lord threatened judgment with an oath: “*As surely as I live, declares the Lord*” (14:28). The judgment would come in the very terms of their libelous complaints about God (14:27–28). They had complained that they had been led out to die in the wilderness; therefore, that is what would happen (14:29). God would wipe out every military man age 20 and up, except the faithful Caleb and Joshua (14:29–30). But their libel wouldn’t poison the hopes of the next generation. They had complained that their children would be captured; however, God would bring the next generation into the land so they could enjoy what their fathers had despised (14:31). The only effect on the children would be years of wandering in the wilderness, waiting for their mutinous parents to die off (14:32, 35). That would require 40 years, a year for each day of rebellious reconnaissance, a period when they learned the frustrating consequences of rebelling against God’s plans (14:34).

Gordon Keddie: (:20-38) -- The Lord returned a five-pan answer, which “sings both of mercy and judgment” (Psalm 101:1).

- 1) He **pardoned** the nation as a whole of the sentence of death (:20).
- 2) He **punished** them, however, by depriving them of their inheritance in the land (:21-23).
- 3) He **promised** faithful Joshua and Caleb that they would enjoy their inheritance in the land (:24).
- 4) He **proscribed** the whole community, by sending them back to the wilderness (for thirty-eight more years), to ensure the fulfilment of his judgment upon them; and he fully explained his reasons for doing so (:25-36).
- 5) He **purged**, through plague, the ten spies, whose “majority report” had precipitated the apostasy of Israel (:37-38).

III. (:26-38) TRAGIC COSTS OF COMPLAINING AGAINST THE LORD – MAKING THE PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME

A. (:26-27) Complaining and Grumbling are Serious Offenses

1. Don’t Presume Against the Lord’s Patience and Forbearance

“And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 27 ‘How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me?’”

2. Don’t Presume that You Will Escape Accountability

“I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me.”

Dennis Cole: (:26-35) - The third section of the Yahweh speech begins with the standard revelatory formula used throughout the Book of Numbers, *wayēdabbēr YHWH*, indicating divine instruction for the leadership of the faithful community. This

is the first time the phrase has been employed in the narrative since **13:1**. Now the divine adjudication concerning the case of the rebellious Israelites is spelled out to Moses the prophet and Aaron the priest with alarming clarity. As noted in the earlier outline of the literary structure, these verses are set forth in a chiastic structure in which **the central theme is the survival and deliverance of the faithful scouts** Joshua and Caleb (**14:30**) in contrast to the male militia whose bodies will all fall in the wilderness from whence they were sent.

B. (:28-35) Consequences Matched to the Complaints

1. (:28-29) Death in the Wilderness for All the Numbered Warriors

a. (:28) Fitting Punishment

“Say to them, 'As I live,' says the LORD, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you;’”

b. (:29) Inescapable Punishment

“your corpses shall fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.”

2. (:30) Exception Made for Faithful Caleb and Joshua

“Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.”

3. (:31-34) Next Generation Will Enter the Land after Painful 40 Year Delay

a. (:31) Ironic Blessing on Next Generation

“Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey-- I will bring them in, and they shall know the land which you have rejected.”

b. (:32) Death in the Wilderness for Disbelieving Generation

“But as for you, your corpses shall fall in this wilderness.”

c. (:33-34) Painful Delay for 40 Years

“And your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they shall suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness. 34 According to the number of days which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall bear your guilt a year, even forty years, and you shall know My opposition.”

Timothy Ashley: One must contrast the two generations here. The verb “to know” is used of both groups. The children, in due course, will know (i.e., experience) the land (**v. 31**), while the older generation will know Yahweh’s frustration and opposition so that they may not go forward, but only in circles until the punishment is fulfilled.

4. (:35) Guarantee of Fulfilment

“I, the LORD, have spoken, surely this I will do to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be destroyed, and there they shall die.”

C. (:36-38) **Clear Distinction in Destiny Between the Unfaithful and the Faithful Spies**

1. (:36-37) Destiny of the Unfaithful = Death Immediately by a Divine Plague

“As for the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land and who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing out a bad report concerning the land, 37 even those men who brought out the very bad report of the land died by a plague before the LORD.”

Ronald Allen: The people as a whole receive a commuted sentence, a mitigated judgment. But not the men who were responsible for the attitudes that led to this debacle of doubt! Those responsible for spreading the bad report had to be put to death. The judgment on the ten evil spies was immediate; the generation that they influenced would live out their lives in the desert, but their lives were forfeit. Only Joshua and Caleb were exempt from this judgment. The repeated mention of these two men is deserved; together they withstood a nation.

2. (:38) Destiny of the Faithful – Life Ongoing into the Promised Land

“But Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive out of those men who went to spy out the land.”

Dennis Cole: Once again in the cycles of this lengthy pericope a comparison is made between the unfaithful ten scouts and the faithful Joshua and Caleb, only this time the contrast included the final judgment against the obstinate majority. The treasonous acts were rehearsed once more in a succinct repetitive and **chiastic fashion** before the punishment was administered. The reiterated phrase, which brackets the focal point of the chiasmus, focuses on the act of spreading a bad report about the land. The center of the statement was the death of the spies. Note the following literary structure, which represents the Hebrew word order in the translation:

- A The Men Sent by Moses to Explore the Land
- B Who Returned and Made the Congregation Grumble
- C And Spread Defamation concerning the Land
- D They Died (by a Plague before YHWH)**
- C' The Men Who Spread Defamation of the Land—for Evil
- B' Joshua and Caleb Lived
- A' Of the Men Who Went to Explore the Land

Those ten died almost immediately from a plague. The wicked community that had banded together in an attempt to overthrow their divinely appointed leaders by stoning them to death (**14:10a**) experienced an untimely death in the desert. Those whom they sought to slay, the steadfast Joshua and Caleb, would survive.

Warren Wiersbe: Moses led the world's longest funeral march, and Caleb and Joshua watched their generations die. But Caleb and Joshua would be encouraged by God's promise that both of them would enter the land and enjoy their inheritance. This assurance alone would sustain them during the trying days of the nation's march, a discipline that wasn't the fault of either Caleb or Joshua. So the blessed hope of Christ's return encourages God's people today in spite of the trials we experience on our pilgrim walk.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What types of things trigger complaining or murmuring in us and how do we correct our attitude?
- 2) How does God's shock and dismay at the rebellion of the Israelites (despite His constant faithfulness) contrast with how we become calloused to our sin?
- 3) Where do we have opportunities to take a brave stand in defense of God's promises and of His loyal love for His people despite peer pressure to sink into bad attitudes?
- 4) Why does God sometimes allow the consequences of our sin to pain our lives even though He has provided forgiveness?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Duguid: Notice, though, how fundamentally **irrational** their unbelief was. The majority report was logically flawed. Contradicting the good report about the nature of the land that the scouts gave Moses at first, the majority spread a bad report among the people, saying that the land devoured those living in it (**13:32**). Yet in the very next breath they went on to describe its inhabitants as giants! Think about that for a moment. How could a barren land produce such fearsomely well-nourished inhabitants? It doesn't add up. Nor does the complaint of the people make any more sense. How could it be better for them to have died in Egypt or in the wilderness than to face death at the hands of the Anakim? Is certain death sooner preferable to possible death later? Does it make sense to believe that the Lord poured out earth-shattering plagues on Egypt, parted the Red Sea in front of his people, and then fed them miraculously with manna in the wilderness only to have them fall at the hands of the inhabitants of the Promised Land? Does God do one dramatic series of miracles in the lives of his people only to fail at the last hurdle, leaving them tantalizingly short of what he promised? That doesn't make sense. . .

Our unbelief is always fundamentally irrational, a sinful refusal to fear God, which results equally inevitably in a sinful fear of people and circumstances. It is as irrational for us to cling to our unbelief as it is for a drowning man to cling to a heavy stone. . .

Raymond Brown: As they continued to murmur, they turned imperceptibly from moaning about their leaders to complaining about God. ‘Why?’ is the most searching question of all, but these rebels had no cause to question God’s wisdom or to doubt his sufficiency after all he had done for them.

They despised his generous provision: ‘*Why is the LORD bringing us to this land ...?*’ It was because he loved them, and it was one of the most lavish things he could have done for them, yet they hurled the choice gift back in his face.

They questioned his promised protection. Did they really imagine that he would bring them so far only to let them fall by the sword? The God who had routed the Amalekites at the beginning of their journey would surely defeat the Canaanites at its close.

They doubted his unfailing love. ‘*Our wives and children will be taken as plunder.*’ It is unthinkable that a God who provided for the communication of the faith through families would allow vast numbers of women and children to be taken as plunder by the Canaanite hordes. He was fully able to care for their children, and later told them so (31).

They disowned his unique redemption. ‘*Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?*’ All he had done in liberating them from their brutal oppressors was dismissed in a heartless, blasphemous sentence.

They spurned his appointed leader. ‘*We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt.*’ It was one thing to dread the future and make a torture of the present. It was quite another to reject the past as a total embarrassment to them. They were looking for someone who would take them back to a ‘pre-Moses’ lifestyle — a life without freedom, guidance, security, provision, protection, forgiveness, worship or hope.

Iain Duguid: God’s **mercy** does not eliminate **justice** in his dealings with Israel. The Lord responded to Moses’ intercession by agreeing to continue his relationship with this people, as Moses requested. Nonetheless, his passion for his glory meant that he could not overlook their sin. This generation that saw his glory in the exodus and yet still did not believe would end up given over to a fitting punishment (14:21–35). Would they rather die in the wilderness than enter the land? So be it; that would be their fate (14:29). Would they rather go back to Egypt than enter the Promised Land? So be it: the next leg of their journey would be back toward the Red Sea rather than onward to Canaan (14:25). The children whom the parents feared would become slaves would be the ones who would experience the freedom of life in the land, while the older generation would die out over forty years in the wilderness—one year for every day of the scouting party’s journey (14:31–34). Out of the original generation, only Joshua and Caleb would live to see God’s promise fulfilled. The remainder of the scouting party

were immediately struck down with a plague, a kind of first fruits of the larger judgment to come (14:37).

If God is a God of justice as well as mercy, though, how can any of us survive? The people of Israel were not radically transformed by their experience of the Lord's mercy. Even though they mourned bitterly, they were far from repentant in their hearts. They were sorry for the effects of their sin, but not for the sin itself. You can see that was the case from the fact that their very next act was a continuation of their unbelief. Instead of following the Lord's instructions and setting out back toward the Red Sea, they set out to try and take Canaan in their own strength (14:40). In spite of Moses' warning that they would not succeed, they set off presumptuously to try to reverse the judgment on themselves. Earlier they refused to enter the land because of unbelief; now they tried to enter the land out of unbelief. Unsurprisingly, they were frustrated and ended up beaten back by the inhabitants of the land (14:45). Without the Lord's help, they should indeed have been afraid to take on the giants who occupied the land.

Warren Wiersbe: When the child of God is in the will of God, there is no place for complaining, even if the circumstances are difficult. The will of God will never lead us where the grace of God can't provide for us or the power of God protect us . . . A Complaining spirit is evidence of an ungrateful heart and an unsundered will. By our grumbling, we're daring to say that we know more than God does about what's best for His people! (Phil. 2:14 and 1 Cor. 10:10)

Chuck Smith: A few contrasts between faith and unbelief:

1. Faith will give comfort in the midst of fears; unbelief will give fear in the midst of comforts.
2. Faith makes great burdens light; unbelief makes light burdens heavy.
3. Faith lifts us when we are down; unbelief puts us down when we were up.
4. Faith brings us near to God when we were far from Him; unbelief puts us far from God when we were near to Him.
5. Faith brings us to the grace of God; unbelief brings us to the wrath of God.
6. Faith purifies the heart; unbelief pollutes the heart.
7. Faith brings peace to the troubled soul; unbelief brings turmoil to the peaceful soul.
8. Faith causes us to rejoice in the midst of sorrows; unbelief causes us to mourn in the midst of blessings.
9. By faith the children passed through the Red Sea; by unbelief they perished in the wilderness.

Yohan Perera: Why Positive Attitudes Matter in Life and Ministry

The Hebrew word *na'ats* (despised) used in **Numbers 14:11; 23; 31** means to reject with disdain or contempt. In which way did they despise him?

- They accused God on the grounds of falsehood and ungodly motives
- They condemned the land God promised to them as a land of death
- They decided to appoint a new leader and go back to Egypt
- They willfully and consciously decided to put their leaders to death

- They tempted God for the 10th time since the exodus from Egypt

How to recognize people with negative Attitudes?

Now that we know the importance of positive attitudes in in Christian Life and Ministry let's see how to recognize people with negative attitudes in order to protect ourselves. They are haughty, arrogant, inflexible, unteachable people who always seek to condemn others

- They shun people that possess positive attitudes. They will try their level best to get rid of such people
- They aggravate small problems and minimize the greater good for their benefit
- They accuse their leaders on false grounds and pretend to be the innocent victims of the system
- They are pessimists living in a world of excuses. They can convince you can't do something because they can't do it in the first place
- They are ungrateful. They habitually under appreciate their blessings and privileges

How to recognize people with positive Attitudes?

As much as we know how to spot a person with negative attitudes, it is also important to know how to recognize people with positive attitudes so that we can work together with them to bring about the Kingdom of God.

- They believe they live in a world of opportunities not excuses. They seize those opportunities as often as they can
- They are humble, flexible and teachable. They always hold the other person in high esteem
- They don't blame man or God when something fails to deliver the expected results. Rather they will work hard to find a solution
- They walk by faith not by sight and trust God against all odds. They encourage others to follow their example

Your attitude determines your destination. They are contagious. Is yours worth catching?

<https://www.virtualpreacher.org/sermon-outlines/the-winning-attitude/>

TEXT: Numbers 14:39-45

TITLE: PRESUMPTION LEADS TO FAILURE IN SPIRITUAL WARFARE

BIG IDEA:

DEVOID OF GODS' FAVOR, PRESUMPTION RECKLESSLY RUSHES FORWARD TO CERTAIN SPIRITUAL DEFEAT

INTRODUCTION:

When God calls us out for our disobedience, we should never try to fix things on our own. We must follow the divinely prescribed formula of repentance and submission to God's revealed will. It is not faith to aggressively charge forward with our own plans for atonement in the arrogant determination of presumption. Especially when it comes to the issue of salvation, man's self-effort and presumptive plans cannot achieve spiritual victory. We only compound the original problem when we try to follow our own schemes without the favor of God's presence and protection.

Timothy Ashley: They now compound their sin of rebellion with arrogance in trying to capture the land on their own. They are like children who had broken a valuable vase and decided to "make it better" by gluing it back together. The result of such action looks nothing like the original. Moses attempts to tell the Israelites that Yahweh would not go with them and that his absence would mean disaster for them, but as elsewhere the people do not show a willingness or ability to listen either to God or to his servants. When they go into the hill country to face the Amalekites and the Canaanites, neither Moses nor the ark goes with them (thus changing the pattern of **10:32**), and the engagement with these native peoples ends in disaster. The Israelites are pursued as far as Hormah. The fear of **14:3** has become a reality.

Dennis Cole: The conclusion is replete with antithetical statements in relationship to the initial instructions given by God and Moses. In Yahweh's instruction to Moses, he stated that he was giving them the land; but now when they attempt to enter "*the place the Lord promised,*" they are warned against doing so. Moses instructed the Israelites to "go up" into the land (**13:17**); now they are commanded, "*Do not go up!*" In earlier episodes of rebellion, Israelite remorse often led to Moses interceding with Yahweh to withdraw his punishment of the nation or at least to lighten its effect. But in this case the prophet proclaimed further warning if the people should respond rebelliously again and attempt to conquer the land. In the end the Amalekites and Canaanites, whom they would have easily conquered with Yahweh the Divine Warrior on their side, would soundly defeat them.

Wiersbe: Pardon led to presumption (v. **39-45**). The people had acted stubbornly like the mule, and now they acted impetuously like the horse (**Ps 32:9**). God forgives us that we might fear Him (**Ps 130:4**), not that we might tempt Him. The flesh can never accomplish what only faith can do. (**Dt 1:41-44**.)

Ryan Christie: Today we're going to be looking at the Israelites and their story and how they mess things up horribly with God. They distrust him and when they mess everything up they too try to fix it on their own and end up failing miserably. What we're going to see through their story is that **when we mess things up with God, the solution is simply to repent and believe.**

I. (:39-40) PRESUMPTIVE IN YOUR PLANNING – MAKING YOUR OWN PLANS WHILE IGNORING THE PREREQUISITE OF HOLINESS – DETERMINATION IS NOT ENOUGH

A. (:39) Remorseful but Not Repentant

“And when Moses spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people mourned greatly.”

Ryan Christie: Israel's first reaction was to mourn and there is some legitimacy to this. People are dying before them; they have been cursed to a life of wandering through the desert only to finally die in that same desert. Things look terribly bleak and feel miserable. To mourn is such a normal response. I would be doing the same thing. Yet we have to see that Israel isn't really even mourning over the fact that they sinned against the God who has been so good to them but they are mourning over the consequences of their sin. They are mourning over the fact that they are being punished for their distrust of God and that they now have a harsh new reality to deal with and it's not pleasant. They no longer get to go live in the Land they were hoping for. They have to stay in this stupid desert for the rest of their lives and things look hopeless. This is something worth mourning about but mourning is not going to be enough. There is a sense here that the people of Israel think that their outcry to God may actually serve as some sort of atonement for what they have done, as if by feeling bad and putting on a scene of mourning they could appease God and show him that they felt sorry enough. We can see this by what they go on to do in the next few verses. It's true that feeling pain and loss at the harsh consequences of sin is real and it's normal but it's not going to be enough to fix their relationship with God that they have just jeopardized. God has declared their punishment and their mourning is not a sufficient substitute for atonement.

https://www.immanuel-baptist.net/sermon/numbers/pdf/140921_Numbers_14_39-45.pdf

B. (:40) Determined but Driven by Self Will

“In the morning, however, they rose up early and went up to the ridge of the hill country, saying, ‘Here we are; we have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the LORD has promised.’”

Ryan Christie: What are the Israelites thinking here? They're thinking, “Hey, we were wrong. We've changed our minds. We can make this all better. We'll just do what God told us to originally.” It's good that they have at least recognized that they have sinned. They have confessed. But what they're doing is adding arrogance and disobedience onto their rebellion. Their hearts haven't changed at all. They have in no way repented

of their first sin, which was not believing in God. Before they didn't trust him and now they are only trusting in themselves. They think that with a confession and by changing their minds, perhaps combined with a dramatic scene of mourning before God that this will be enough to change God's mind about what has happened and to reverse the effects of what they've done.

Jon Quinn: "*but we will go up*" -- In spite of the LORD'S words to the contrary, these people insisted. They were going to have it their way. When will they, and us today, ever learn that faith is submitting to the LORD'S way. Understand this: if we insist on our way, then the LORD will not be present with us, and we are doomed to failure. . .

Confession without submission is empty and worthless. It was a sin for these people to seek to possess Canaan after God had decreed that their generation would not possess it. No amount of confessing past wrongs allows us to commit a sin in the present without guilt. This confession was not from a contrite heart before God but rather a desperate gambit to try anything to recover what they had lost.

II. (:41-43) PURPOSELESS IN YOUR PURSUITS – NOT FOLLOWING THE LORD SO NOT PROTECTED BY HIS PRESENCE – DEFEAT IS GUARANTEED

A. (:41) Disobedience Guarantees Defeat

"But Moses said, 'Why then are you transgressing the commandment of the LORD, when it will not succeed?'"

B. (:42) Disregarding Divine Warnings Guarantees Defeat

1. Clear Warning

"Do not go up, lest you be struck down before your enemies,"

2. Key Factor

"for the LORD is not among you."

C. (:43) Denying the Obvious Guarantees Defeat

You are living in a dream world if you think you are going to be victorious on your own initiative and your own power when you have forsaken the Lord.

1. Enemy is Stronger and More Prepared

"For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there in front of you,"

2. Defeat is Certain

"and you will fall by the sword,"

3. God is Not on Your Side

a. Because of Your Apostasy

"inasmuch as you have turned back from following the LORD."

- b. Because of the Removal of His Favorable Presence
“*And the LORD will not be with you.*”

III. (:44-45) POWERLESS IN YOUR PERFORMANCE – HEADING UNDEFENDED INTO A BEAT DOWN – DEFENSELESS IS RECKLESS

A. (:44) Foolish Attack

1. Defiant of God’s Warnings

“*But they went up heedlessly to the ridge of the hill country;*”

Wiersbe: The word translated “*presumed*” in **14:44** comes from a Hebrew word that means “to be lifted up,” that is “to be proud, arrogant, and swelled up with one’s own importance.” The soldiers’ boast “*We will go up and fight,*” was answered by God’s warning, “*I will not be with you*” (**Deut. 1:42-43**, NIV). Man’s efforts without God’s blessing do more harm than good, for Jesus said, “*Without me you can do nothing*” (**John 15:5**).

Bruce Hurt: **Heedlessly** (*aphal*) has the basic meaning of “swelling, puffed up, or lifted up” figuratively picturing to be proud, to presume. It describes carrying on an act of presumption, arrogance, against the best advice. In the only other use it refers to a person who has become too audacious, proud (**Hab. 2:4**). The picture is of a person with their head held high or one having a swollen head, analogous to our modern idiom accusing someone of having “the big head”. This is someone who is thinking higher of himself than he ought to think (cf **Ro 12:3**). In **Nu 14:44** Israel had “the big head” and so went up heedlessly (hif imperfect 3masc plural), with presumption, acting arrogantly and haughtily in complete disregard for Moses’ clear warning not to do so.

Alfred Edersheim: The obedience which is not of simple faith is of self-confidence, and only another kind of unbelief and self-righteousness.

2. Devoid of God’s Favorable Presence and Powerful Leadership

“*neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses left the camp.*”

B. (:45) Ferocious Beat Down

“*Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah.*”

Raymond Brown: The sad episode of Israel’s persistent rebellion moved to a tragic conclusion. Their defeated soldiers were buried in the desert and the dejected Israelites began a tediously delayed journey, which lingered in Israel’s corporate memory. Though a repeated psalm, it was to teach the generations to come that disobedience to God is the gateway to despair: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Where have you acted presumptuously and what transpired as a result?
- 2) When we mess up in our relationship with God, how are we tempted to try to fix things up ourselves?
- 3) What happens when you follow your emotions instead of obeying the Word and the revealed will of God?
- 4) Do you think that your mere confession of sin will wipe out all consequences and restore everything to the way it was previous to your rebellion?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Dennis Cole: As **Ashley** notes, “The children of Israel rose up early in the morning, that is, the day in which they had been commanded to turn and depart into the wilderness by the way of the Reed Sea (v. 25). They have disobeyed God once again and mistaken the seriousness of his judgment for something amenable to change if only they will do what was originally commanded.” Sometimes the consequences of sin and rebellion are irreversible, and one must endure the experience of God’s judgment before a new course of action brings blessing. Sometimes those consequences endure for a lifetime, but even in those settings we must continue in faith so that our lives reflect redemption rather than further reproach.

Brueggemann: God’s verdict led “*the people [to be] filled with grief*” (14:39), but not repentant sorrow leading to renewed obedience (cf. **2 Cor 7:10**). It was mere discontent for things lost, which refused to accept the finality of the curse upon their generation. They conceded, “*We have sinned*” (14:40); however, it was sorrow come too late (cf. **Heb 12:17**). Rather than seeking God’s will and promising a new obedience, they presumptuously said, “*We are ready to enter the land*” (14:40b). Now, rather than the whine of the scouts, it was the warning of Moses: “*It won’t work... You will only be crushed by your enemies*” (14:41–42). Again, it was *lex talionis*: “*The Lord will abandon you because you have abandoned the Lord*” (14:43). The people pushed on anyway (14:44), and their enemies ran them down.

Ronald Allen: Here is the classic example of too little, too late. Now too late to be in faith, the people determine to go up to the land they had refused. They confessed that they had sinned (v. 40), but it is difficult to know what they meant by this confession since it is not elaborated on. But their confession was partial at best, as their actions are rash and foolish, not measured and deliberate. Such a course of action was doomed to failure. Not only was the Lord not with them in this belated act; he was against them

(v. 41). In fact, he had warned them not to go this way at all but to turn back to the desert (v. 25). Their subsequent defeat (v. 45) was another judgment the rebellious people brought on their heads. In fact, any soldiers who died in this abortive warfare only hastened their own punishment for the rebellion at Kadesh.

C.H.M.: What a mass of contradictions is the human heart. When exhorted to go up at once, in the energy of faith, and possess the land, they shrank back and refused to go. They fell down and wept when they ought to have gone up and conquered. In vain did the faithful Caleb assure them that the Lord would bring them in and plant them in the mountain of His inheritance – that He was able to do it. They would not go up, because they could not trust God. But now, instead of bowing their heads and accepting the governmental dealings of God, they would go up, presumptuously, trusting in themselves.

But, ah! How vain to move without the living God in their midst! Without Him they could do nothing. And yet, when they might have had Him, they were afraid of the Amalekites; but now, they presume to face those very people without Him. . .

Here lay the grand secret. The Lord's presence with His people secures victory over every foe; but if He be not with them, they are as water poured upon the ground.

James Smith: The Sin of Presumption

In doing so they went—

1. AGAINST THE WORD OF GOD. “*Wherefore do ye now trespass? It shall not prosper*” (v. 41). What was their duty and privilege yesterday becomes disobedience to-day. God had said, “*In this wilderness they shall die.*” They said, “*We will go up.*” But now it was in their own strength. Vain effort.

2. PRESUMING ON THE PAST MERCIES OF GOD. “*Lo, we be here.*” We have been preserved and brought through to this point. “*We will go up.*” It is in vain we lean on past favours and experiences when by our sin we have grieved the Holy Ghost. Murmuring is sure to lead to failure.

3. WITHOUT THE PRESENCE OF GOD. “*They presumed to go up, nevertheless the ark of the Lord departed not out of the camp*” (v. 44). If we go contrary to God's Word we must go without His presence. Without Me ye can do nothing. The Lord is with you while you be with Him in His will and purposes (2 Chron. 15:2). Except Thy presence go with us, carry us not up hence.

4. THINKING THAT A FORMAL CONFESSION WOULD SATISFY GOD. “*We will go up, for we have sinned*” (v. 40). Confession without the submission of the will to the mind of God is ardent hypocrisy. Sin may be felt, yet not forsaken. Unless the moth has been hopelessly scorched with the flame at its first contact it will seek it again.

What they teach us. These things which happened to them are ensamples to us (1 Cor. 10:11). There is here a solemn warning to the—

1. CHRISTIAN WORKER. Beware of godless effort, of hoping to succeed in Christ's work without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit with you and in you. Except the Lord build the city they labour in vain who build it.

2. SELF-RIGHTEOUS. Beware of seeking the heavenly inheritance, the land of promise, without first making sure that God is with you by His Word and promise.

3. FORMALIST. Beware of trusting formal prayers and confessions while the revealed will of God stands opposed to your character and purposes (vs. 41, 42).

4. PROCRASTINATING. Beware of depending on a late repentance. Those Israelites found that the eleventh hour for them was too late. Their last effort was a fatal one. The ark did not always rest in Jordan. If one thief was saved at the eleventh hour, the other perished. Here again, "*Beware of the sin of presumption.*" For this sin there was no sacrifice appointed (**Heb. 6:4–6**).

Brian Bell: How fickle is human nature! One day the nation was mourning because of their plight, and the next day they were recklessly trying to accomplish God's work apart from God's will and God's blessing. They thought that because they had confessed their sin, God would change His mind and give them victory. The people had acted stubbornly like the mule, & now they acted impetuously like the horse. (**Ps.32:8** *Do not be like the horse or the mule*) The whole venture was presumption on their part; they were living by chance not by faith. How many Christians today realize their failings and then try to make up for them in fleshly activities that only lead to discouragement and defeat? All the Israelites could do was, accept God's judgment & surrender to His will. Far better to wander in the wilderness in the will of God than to fight a losing battle out of the will of God. The carnal mind cannot serve God; it is timid when it should be bold, & bold when it should be timid. It advances when it should stand still; & it stands still when it should advance.

TEXT: Numbers 15:1-41

TITLE: RESPONDING TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE AS WE ANTICIPATE HIS BLESSING

BIG IDEA:

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S DISCIPLINE WILL CONFIRM US IN HOLINESS AS WE:

- REJOICE (PLEASE) THE LORD
- RESPECT THE LORD
- REMEMBER THE LORD

INTRODUCTION:

This passage of detailed instructions about various offerings and sacrifices may seem out of place in the narrative of the wilderness wanderings of God's chosen nation. But actually it is the appropriate follow-up to the disappointment of spiritual failure and severe discipline that causes the nation to enter into a 38 year delay of wandering in the desert before entering the Promised Land. God has not written off His people or abandoned His promises. All of the instructions in this chapter anticipate the blessings of entering Canaan. God's discipline is intended to strengthen the covenant relationship.

Gordon Wenham: More striking is the careful arrangement of this group of laws. As is typical of the cultic laws in Leviticus, this chapter falls neatly into three sections, each beginning with The Lord said to Moses, '*Say to the people of Israel*' (**1f., 17f., 37f.**), usually moving on to mention the land (**2, 18**), then a command to do or make something (Hebrew *'āsâ*, **3, 22ff., 28ff.**) and concluding with the great formula recalling Israel's salvation from Egypt and her call to holiness (**41; cf. Lev. 19:36f.; 20:26; 22:31-33; 23:43; 25:55**).

It therefore seems likely that these laws have been placed here as a deliberate comment on the preceding narrative. The people have questioned the basic purpose of their journey, and in judgment God has declared the adults will die out in the wilderness. After a break of forty years their children will enter the promised land of Canaan. **Chapter 14** closes with a defeat by the Canaanites at Hormah. A question mark hangs over the whole enterprise.

Dennis Cole: Each of the offerings sections functions within the sequential outline to focus the reader and hearer on the proper relationship between God and humanity in the context of the preceding material of the given cycle. . .

Like many sections of the Torah, this chapter contains a key word that provides a unifying element to the entire chapter, namely the verb *'āsāh*, meaning "to make" or "to perform." After the introduction in vv. 1-2, the Israelites were instructed **to make various fire offerings to the Lord**, and the verb is used eleven times in vv. 3-16 in

delineating the sacrificial elements or in describing the process by which they were offered. It does not occur in the section dealing with the presentation of the first fruits of the dough (vv. 17–21), though in the following expansion of laws related to inadvertent and defiant sins (vv. 22–36) the term is employed six times. In the final section (vv. 37–41) the Israelites were instructed concerning the “making” of the garment tassels as a covenant reminder.

J. Ligon Duncan: Right when Israel is at the apex of their failure and unbelief and sin on the verge of going into the land (and are getting ready to be sent back into the wilderness for forty years because of their sin), suddenly God repeats these laws. And if you’ll notice, all these laws are about the land — about what they’re supposed to do when they’re in the land, even though for the next forty years they’re not going to be in the land. Even though they have just sinned a sin that is going to keep them out of the land for forty years, God is giving them right at this point laws that they are to keep in the land.

Robert Rayburn: These regulations further indicate that the principles of life in the covenant Yahweh has made with his people have not changed. Sacrifice is still an essential instrument of maintaining the covenant relationship and moral and ritual purity are still required of God’s people.

Timothy Ashley: The whole of **ch. 15** is best seen as a response to the rebellion of **chs. 13–14**. At the end of those chapters the future of the people is in doubt, the whole people has been disobedient to Yahweh; an entire generation will die in the wilderness as a payment for sin. **Ch. 15** begins with a word of **hope** to the new generation: *When you come into your dwelling land ... (v. 2; cf. v. 18)*. What follows is for the new generation in the new land. Furthermore it is still Yahweh who speaks. God is still determined to bring them into the land (v. 2b). The whole chapter shows that fullness of life is still to be had by exact obedience to Yahweh’s word. When the people come into the land of Canaan they will have enough agricultural abundance to afford these offerings of fine flour, oil, and wine for every appropriate sacrifice.

I. (:1-16) REJOICE (PLEASE) THE LORD – OFFERING SACRIFICES OF COVENANT-BASED WORSHIP

*“Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
‘Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them,’”*

Dennis Cole: The first section (vv. 1–21) delineates the various offerings to be presented to the Lord when the covenant people enter the Promised Land rejected in the previous chapter. By way of divine directive, the rejection of the land by the majority of the spies and the people will be surmounted. God will bring them into the land of promise (15:2–3, 18–19) in spite of their rebellious rejection of that gracious gift, and he will bless them so abundantly that they will in turn bring multitudinous sacrifices and offerings with which to honor and worship him. The accompaniment of animal sacrifices with grain and oil offerings, plus the wine libations, were quite appropriate

considering the previous setting of the land exploration. The scouts examined the quality of the agricultural produce of the land and even brought back a spectacular sample from the vineyard. The vineyard was often a symbol of God's richest blessing upon the land. The offerings from the grain fields were to be of the first fruits, the earliest and choicest of the crops the Lord bestowed. The issue behind the singular requirements for the bringing of these offerings by either a native Israelite or a resident alien (vv. 13–16) may be presented at this point in the context of the mixed multitude or rabble who instigated the uprising over food supply (11:4).

Constable: The Israelites were to accompany every burnt offering and every peace offering with a meal offering and a drink offering of wine. The amounts of meal and wine varied, and these variations are clear in the text. An ephah was about half a bushel, and a hin was about a gallon. Since grapes were large and abundant in Canaan (cf. **Numbers 13:23**), wine played a significant part in Israel's offerings. This offering expressed gratitude for the grapes of the land. The priests poured drink offerings out; they did not drink them.

Eugene Merrill: These burnt and freewill offerings were not sin or guilt offerings, since their form and content were invariable (**Lev. 4:1-6:7**); these were votive, fellowship, and thank or praise offerings (**Lev. 1-3**).

Ronald Allen: they relate more to the desire of the Hebrew believer for spontaneous, grateful response to the wonder of knowing God.

A. (:2-3) Offerings by Fire Commanded

1. (:2) Anticipating Fulfilment of the Land Promise

“When you enter the land where you are to live, which I am giving you,”

Despite all of the grumbling and disbelief and rebellion, the Lord wanted to reassure His people of His covenant commitment to eventually bring them into the Promised Land.

2. (:3) Approaching God Via Various Sweet Savor Sacrifices

“then make an offering by fire to the LORD, a burnt offering or a sacrifice to fulfill a special vow, or as a freewill offering or in your appointed times, to make a soothing aroma to the LORD, from the herd or from the flock.”

Gordon Wenham: These laws reassert very emphatically that the Lord will bring his people into Canaan. They both explicitly look forward to this time (**2, 18**) and implicitly, by specifying that large amounts of flour, oil and wine must accompany animal sacrifice, guarantee Israel's entry into the land. If God insists that these things be offered, it is a pledge that Israel will eventually reach the land where they are freely available. These regulations also re-emphasize the role of sacrifice as the divinely appointed means of upholding the covenant and the importance of fulfilling the commandments. Though God's ultimate purposes will not be thwarted by disobedience,

the individual and the congregation will still be judged for deliberate sin or even inadvertent mistakes that are not atoned for by sacrifice. This chapter, then, epitomizes and comments on some of the themes that dominate the book of Leviticus. Israel is to show forth her election by faithfully observing the moral and ritual law: in so doing they will become a truly holy people, and in a full sense the Lord will be their God (40f.). Their unbelief that was focused in the spy story did not nullify these covenant promises. Whole-hearted repentance and the offering of sacrifice can restore them to a position where they can fully experience God's blessing.

Warren Wiersbe: The phrase “*to make a sweet savor [aroma] unto the Lord*” is found five times in this paragraph (vv. 3, 7, 10, 13 14) and means “an aroma pleasing to the Lord.” The five basic Mosaic offerings were the burnt offering, meal offering, peace offering, sin offering, and trespass offering (Lev. 1-7). The first three were “sweet savor” sacrifices, designed to please the Lord, but the sin offering and the trespass offering were not “sweet savor” because they dealt with guilt and sin, and there's nothing pleasing to God about sin.

The burnt offering typified the worshiper's complete devotion to God, for the animal was totally consumed on the altar. The meal (grain) offering spoke of the worshiper's dedication of his labor to the Lord, and the peace (trespass) offering represented joyful fellowship and thanksgiving to God for His blessings.

B. (:4-7) Offerings Accompanied by Grain and Wine

“And the one who presents his offering shall present to the LORD a grain offering of one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil, 5 and you shall prepare wine for the libation, one-fourth of a hin, with the burnt offering or for the sacrifice, for each lamb. 6 'Or for a ram you shall prepare as a grain offering two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-third of a hin of oil; 7 and for the libation you shall offer one-third of a hin of wine as a soothing aroma to the LORD.”

Ronald Allen: The provision of “*fine flour*” (*solet*, v.4) speaks of luxurious food rather than ordinary flour. This type of flour was used in dainty cooking (Ezek 16:13), at the table of the king (1 Kings 4:22), for honored guests (Gen 18:6), and in the worship of God. Hence, the attitude toward the flour was the same as toward the animals one might bring to the worship of God; only the best was good enough, for the gift was to the Lord. We suspect that the oil and wine used in these offerings were similarly selected from choice, not common, stocks.

Warren Wiersbe: Christians today see in the fine flour a picture of Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6), who offered Himself to God for us “*as a sweet-smelling aroma*” (Eph. 5:2). The flour also acknowledges God as the generous source of all our food. The oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Zech. 4), and the wine reminds us of the joy of the Lord (Ps. 104:15). It pleases the heart of God when His people spontaneously thank Him for the material and spiritual blessings that He sends so faithfully and bountifully.

C. (:8-13) Offerings Further Regulated by the Lord

1. (:8-12) Proportions for the Sacrificial Regulations Specified

“And when you prepare a bull as a burnt offering or a sacrifice, to fulfill a special vow, or for peace offerings to the LORD, 9 then you shall offer with the bull a grain offering of three-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-half a hin of oil; 10 and you shall offer as the libation one-half a hin of wine as an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD. 11 Thus it shall be done for each ox, or for each ram, or for each of the male lambs, or of the goats. According to the number that you prepare, so you shall do for everyone according to their number.”

2. (:13) Purpose of Following the Sacrificial Regulations

“All who are native shall do these things in this manner, in presenting an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD.”

D. (:14-16) Same Standard for the Native Israelite and for the Foreigner

“And if an alien sojourns with you, or one who may be among you throughout your generations, and he wishes to make an offering by fire, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, just as you do, so he shall do. 15 As for the assembly, there shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. 16 There is to be one law and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you.”

Dennis Cole: The proper extension of justice and righteousness to the resident alien was an important element of Israel’s existence as a unique people of God and of their calling to be a source of blessing and light to the world (**Gen 12:3; Isa 42:6; 49:6**). A variety of non-Israelites had come out from the bondage of Egypt with the descendants of the sons of Jacob, and though some of them (among the “*rabble*,” **Num 11:4**) had helped instigate the rebellious murmuring concerning their food supply, the opportunity for repentance under the umbrella of the covenant relationship would always be there. After all, there were no “native-Israelites”—that is, those born in the land—when God delivered his people from bondage and oppression. So the door was always to be open to proselytes who would desire to identify with Israel, their faith, and their God.

II. (:17-36) RESPECT THE LORD – SHOWING OUR DEDICATION AND OBEDIENCE

*“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
‘Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, ’”*

A. (:18-21) Respect the Lord by Your Gratitude and Loyalty – Bring Him Your Best -- Dedication

1. (:18-19) Our Offerings Reflect Our Gratitude for God’s Faithfulness

“When you enter the land where I bring you, 19 then it shall be, that when you eat of the food of the land, you shall lift up an offering to the LORD.”

2. (:20-21) Our Offerings Reflect Our Loyalty for God’s Priority in Our Life

“Of the first of your dough you shall lift up a cake as an offering; as the offering of the threshing floor, so you shall lift it up. 21 From the first of your dough you shall give to the LORD an offering throughout your generations.”

B. (:22-36) Respect the Lord by Taking Sin Seriously – Purification Offering – Obedience

1. (:22-29) Obedience -- Dealing with Inadvertent Sins

Dennis Cole: The second section (vv. 22–36) contains rules pertaining to purification rituals in the context of unintentional sins and the ultimate punishment for intentional or defiant sins. This material is presented in response to the defiance of the people, especially the ten unfaithful scouts. They provide the means for symbolically addressing the issue of failing to follow God’s instruction. Unintentional sins require restitution or reparation offerings, but flagrant, overt rebellion against God carries dire consequences, even death. Hence, in vv. 32–36 an example of intentional sin and its consequences is recounted. Since the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant relationship between God and man, the inclusion here is emphatic in light of the breach of the covenant in the immediate context. In the larger context this section would remind the people of the consequences of rebellion against the covenant commandments, namely judgment and loss of the land. For generations to come they would hear the story of the loss of a whole generation of their forefathers because of rebellion and sin. The abuse of the Sabbath would be decried throughout the history of Israel, especially by the latter prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. At the end of the history of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, Jeremiah would prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem because of the breaking of the Sabbath.

a. (:22-23) Nature and Scope of Inadvertent Sins

1) Nature of Inadvertent Sins

“But when you unwittingly fail”

Ronald Allen: God made high demands and expected compliance, but he also provided avenues for redress when one did not comply fully. Therefore we conclude that in the Torah God speaks in grace; in the most exacting law there is mercy, and in all of the Torah the intention is to know him and to relate to him.

2) Scope of Responsibility of Obedience

“and do not observe all these commandments, which the LORD has spoken to Moses, 23 even all that the LORD has commanded you through Moses, from the day when

the LORD gave commandment and onward throughout your generations,”

Robert Rayburn: Now, two different types of unintentional sins are mentioned: those committed by the community as a whole, and those committed by individuals. In each case forgiveness and purification are possible through the faithful use of the sacrificial system.

b. (:24-26) Inadvertent Sins Committed by the Community

1) (:24) Response of the Community

“then it shall be, if it is done unintentionally, without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation shall offer one bull for a burnt offering, as a soothing aroma to the LORD, with its grain offering, and its libation, according to the ordinance, and one male goat for a sin offering.”

2) (:25-26) Response of the Priest

“Then the priest shall make atonement for all the congregation of the sons of Israel, and they shall be forgiven; for it was an error, and they have brought their offering, an offering by fire to the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their error. 26 So all the congregation of the sons of Israel will be forgiven, with the alien who sojourns among them, for it happened to all the people through error.”

c. (:27-28) Inadvertent Sins Committed by the Individual

1) (:27) Response of the Individual

“Also if one person sins unintentionally, then he shall offer a one year old female goat for a sin offering.”

2) (:28) Response of the Priest

“And the priest shall make atonement before the LORD for the person who goes astray when he sins unintentionally, making atonement for him that he may be forgiven.”

d. (:29) Same Standard for Native Israelite and for the Foreigner

“You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the sons of Israel and for the alien who sojourns among them.”

3. (:30-36) Obedience -- Dealing with Intentional Sins of Defiance

a. (:30-31) Points of Emphasis

1) Defiant Attitude

“But the person who does anything defiantly,”

2) Impartial Standards

“whether he is native or an alien,”

3) Disrespect towards God

“that one is blaspheming the LORD;”

4) Excommunication from the Community

“and that person shall be cut off from among his people.”

5) Rebellion as the Root Sin

*“Because he has despised the word of the LORD
and has broken His commandment,”*

6) Punishment Proscribed

“that person shall be completely cut off;”

7) Condemnation without Forgiveness

“his guilt shall be on him.”

R. K. Harrison: Blatant defiance of the revealed truths of the Sinaitic covenant constituted a direct, conscious repudiation of the God of that covenant, the penalty for which was to be “*cut off*,” i.e., removed from membership in the community by being executed (**Lev. 24:11-16**). This penalty also applied to the resident alien as well as to the native Israelite.

b. (:32-36) Case Example of Intentional Violation of the Sabbath

1) (:32-34) Capture of the Offender

a) (:32) Offense

*“Now while the sons of Israel were in the
wilderness,
they found a man gathering wood on the sabbath
day.”*

b) (:33) Accountability

*“And those who found him gathering wood
brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the
congregation;”*

c) (:34) Imprisonment

*“and they put him in custody because it had not
been declared what should be done to him.”*

Constable: This incident illustrates the fate of the Israelite or foreigner in Israel who deliberately violated the law of Sabbath observance. It clarifies the meaning of defiant sin as well as what it means to be "*cut off from among his people*" (**Numbers 15:30-31**). Violation of this law drew the death penalty (**Exodus 31:14-15; Exodus 35:2**). It is like the "*unforgivable sin*" in the New Testament in that there was no forgiveness of it. [Note: **Mark Rooker**, *Leviticus*, p55.] God revealed on this occasion that such an offender was to die by stoning (cf. **Leviticus 20:2**). Whereas Moses had previously recorded the penalty, he had not explained the method of execution (**Numbers 15:34**). Other occasions on which Moses had to ask God for guidance in difficult cases appear in **Numbers 9:7-8; Numbers 27:1-11; and Leviticus 24:10-23**.

2) (:35-36) Execution of the Offender
"Then the LORD said to Moses"

a) (:35) Death by Stoning Proscribed
*"The man shall surely be put to death;
all the congregation shall stone him with stones
outside the camp."*

Iain Duguid: There is no such thing as a trivial sin. Some sins may seem less severe than others. It may look on the surface as if swearing and coveting are less serious than murder and adultery. But the heart attitude is what counts. All sin is, on one level or another, an expression of cosmic rebellion against our Creator. It is a more or less deliberate turning of our backs on the one who made us for fellowship with him. That is why the wages of all sin is death, as **Romans 6:23** reminds us. If we turn our backs on God in sin, it is fitting that he should turn his back on us. That is what we deserve every time we sin, and if he carries out that sentence upon us, it will mean our eternal death. All sin is therefore serious, but defiant sin is especially so. If we willfully and persistently turn our backs on God, how shall the relationship be restored? How can there be anything in store other than the death we have chosen for ourselves?

b) (:36) Death by Stoning Carried Out
*"So all the congregation brought him outside the
camp, and stoned him to death with stones,
just as the LORD had commanded Moses."*

Ronald Allen: We may add a comment on "Christian sabbath keeping." The Sabbath was the seal of God's covenant with Israel; as a distinctly Israelite institution, we speak in an oxymoron if we describe Sunday, the Lord's Day, as a "Christian sabbath." If we really believed that Sunday is the "Sabbath," then not only would we need to transform it to a day of rest (rather than the frenetic activities that mark most church-going families on this day!); but we would logically have to consider the application of the seriousness of this pericope for infraction. For Sabbath breaking in this story is a blatant revolt against God that is deserving of death!

III. (:37-41) REMEMBER THE LORD AND HIS COMMANDS – RESPOND TO HIS ROYAL RULE WITH A COMMITMENT TO HOLINESS AND APPRECIATION FOR REDEMPTION

*“The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying,
‘Speak to the sons of Israel,’”*

Dennis Cole: The chapter concludes (vv. 37–41) with instructions regarding the tasseled garments that were to be worn as a reminder of the covenant stipulations, whereby they might live in an obedient, faithful relationship to the God of the covenant. They set forth a means (garment fringes) for having a constant physical reminder of the special relationship between God and his people so they might not defy him as the generation represented by the ten timid spies had done. In Deuteronomy that outward sign of the covenant between God and man was the wearing of phylacteries bound to the forehead and forearm, which were symbols of their subservience in the covenant relationship to God. The epilogue to the chapter presents the great covenant proclamation of Yahweh as the Sovereign Lord, who delivered his people from slavery and oppression. The people must acknowledge him as their rightful King by being obedient to his commands.

Constable: The Israelite was to fasten the tassel to the garment with a blue thread, or it had to contain a blue thread. The blue color, as noted in our study of the tabernacle coverings, probably symbolized heavenly origin and royalty. Thus God apparently wanted the blue thread to remind the Israelites of their holy calling as a kingdom of priests. These tassels reminded the Israelites of their privileged position in the world and their noble and holy calling.

The tassels were clearly a visual aid for the Israelites and probably produced a conditioned response in the minds of pious Jews (cf. **Deuteronomy 6:6-9**). They did not bring to mind any one commandment but reminded the observer that he should observe all of God’s laws. He was distinct by virtue of his calling, as was the garment he observed. Perhaps God also chose the outer garment because the Israelites were as His outer garment by which the world recognized Him. His people were to be an adornment to Him (cf. **Titus 2:10**). Thus God specified something that would warn His people before they sinned; He did not just specify punishment after they sinned.

A. (:38-40) Visual Aid to Encourage Obedience = Blue Tassels on Hems of Garments

1. (:38) Sewing of the Blue Tassels on the Garments

“and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a cord of blue.”

Eugene Merrill: These tassels (cf. Deut. 22:12) would serve as visual aids to help them remember to obey all His commands.

Timothy Ashley: the color blue marked something as important. It is likely that it was the mark of royalty. The king of Israel was Yahweh. The color blue therefore marked that which belonged especially to him. One showed divine ownership by fulfilling the role of “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (**Exod. 19:6**). Holiness of life was the hallmark of Yahweh’s person (“be holy as I am holy,” **Lev. 11:44**, etc.).

2. (:39-40) Significance of the Blue Tassels

“And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, in order that you may remember to do all My commandments, and be holy to your God.”

Iain Duguid: In particular, the tassels served as a reminder of two things. In the first place, they reminded the Israelites who they were by God’s overwhelming grace. They were the people of the Lord, the people he had redeemed from Egypt. He had redeemed them so that they might have an ongoing relationship with him: neither the power of Egypt nor their stubborn, defiant rebellion could compromise that purpose (**v. 41**). Secondly, though, it reminded the Israelites of the obligations that went with their calling. They were redeemed from Egypt to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood. God brought them out of bondage so that they might obey his commands and be consecrated to their God, instead of going after the lusts of their own hearts and eyes (**vv. 39, 40**).

In some ways, with this combined emphasis on their privilege and responsibility, the requirement to wear the tassels sums up the thrust of the whole chapter. God redeemed Israel by his grace for relationship with him; yet that did not now leave them free to do whatever they wanted to do. Such “freedom” would actually merely be a different kind of bondage, prostituting themselves to their own lusts (**v. 39**). A relationship with God by grace does not eliminate the need for obedience but rather forms the foundation for it. The God who commands us is the same God who first delivered us from bondage; so we know that his purposes in commanding us are good. In fact, he delivered us from our former bondage to sin so we could experience the true freedom that comes as we obey his commandments and law. His law turns out to be the path to true liberty.

B. (:41) Vocal Testimony of God’s Role as Redeemer

*“I am the LORD your God
who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be your God;
I am the LORD your God.”*

Ronald Allen: The pericope – and the chapter – ends on a high note of the self-revelation of the Lord and his declaration of purpose for his people. The words “*I am the Lord your God*” (repeated) have about them the sound of a litany, a recitation of faith. The demands that God made on his people came from his right of redemption. By his act of deliverance, Yahweh speaks with the demands of his character. Further, the chapter begins and concludes with the continuing promise of God to bring his

people into the land. He is still at work in the process of completing their redemption from Egypt. The command to turn back to the desert (14:25) is for a lengthy detour, not an abandonment of the journey itself.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) After experiencing spiritual defeat (like the Israelites did in Chap. 14), how can we renew our confidence in our relationship with the Lord?
- 2) Do we hold on to God's promises and expect their fulfillment by grace or by works?
- 3) In what ways do we demonstrate to God that we take sin seriously?
- 4) When is the Lord most pleased with our spiritual service?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Dennis Cole: In the earlier chapters of the Book of Numbers, emphasis was placed upon several themes, including covenant faithfulness, holiness, and purity among the members of the community. The unclean and the adulterous were to be restricted from the sanctity of the community gathered by tribes around the tabernacle as the holy epicenter. God in the tabernacle, which reflected his presence and providence, was the focal point of the community life in work and worship. Now the nation stood at the crossroads of faith and futility. They had not done as Yahweh had commanded in their rejection of the Promised Land (13:1, 31–32; 14:9–11). Korah and his followers would violate the holiness of the sanctuary with their presumptuous attempt to usurp the priesthood (**chaps. 16–17**). Disharmony ran rampant when the rabble started the camp murmuring (11:4), when Aaron and Miriam challenged Moses' authority (12:1–2), and then the majority of the scouts incited the people to rebel against Joshua and Caleb, Moses and Aaron, and reject the land (13:30–14:10). The penalty for the leaders of the rebellion was death by plague (14:37), and for the generation of followers it was destitute life in the wilderness.

Therefore the inclusion at this point of an exemplar of adjudication in the case of a key covenant violation was most appropriate. This juxtapositioning of material in **chaps. 11–14** with that of **chap. 15** would serve to remind the younger generation that survived the forty-year desert experience and the many future generations that God would bless abundantly the faithful and obedient people of God, but the rebellious would experience only hardship and death. This same implicit challenge would be issued explicitly by Joshua after the land had been divided among the various tribes, when he proclaimed boldly: *“Fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. ... But if serving the Lord*

seems undesirable to you, then choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh 24:15).

David Thompson: WHEN THE SONS OF ISRAEL ENTER THE LAND, THEY MUST MAKE CERTAIN THAT THEY OBEY THE WORD OF GOD IN REGARD TO THE OFFERINGS, IN REGARD TO PEOPLE, IN REGARD TO THE LAW AND IN REGARD TO THEIR OWN HEART.

God made a promise to Abraham that He would give him a land (**Gen. 12:1-3**). Even when God let the spies go into the land, He told them “*I am going to give this land to the sons of Israel*” (**Num. 13:2**). So even when God’s people blow it, they cannot stop God from fulfilling His Word. There is a wonderful truth to see from Israel and that is “God’s will may be delayed, but it cannot be destroyed.” “God’s will may be interrupted, but it cannot be eliminated.”

One thing was certain, and these people better very carefully consider this fact, when God would bring them into that land, they had better be serious about obeying His Word and not following their own heart or eyes or whims (**15:39**). This is what got them into trouble. If God grants another opportunity to receive His blessings, His people need to truly focus on God’s Word.

Now there are five areas of obedience that God spells out in this chapter:

AREA OF OBEDIENCE #1 – If you want God’s blessings, give the right offerings and offer the right sacrifices. **15:1-13**

AREA OF OBEDIENCE #2 – If you want God’s blessings, make certain alien people conform to God-ordained worship and offerings. **15:14-16**

God’s people are never to allow people from the world to affect what they do in worship. At times there would be those who would want to live with the Israelites, who were not Israelites. It was the responsibility of the people to make sure that they influenced them rather than the alien influencing the Israelite.

AREA OF OBEDIENCE #3 – If you want God’s blessings, realize there is a difference between unintentional disobedience and Intentional disobedience. **15:17-31**

Now when one failed, but was not in blatant rebellion against God and His Word, an atonement sacrifice could be made. Ignorance is no excuse. God will not pretend failure does not exist. God will never pretend that disobedience to His Word never happened. If someone realized I didn’t do what God said I was supposed to do, they needed to deal with it straight up and head on.

If, on the other hand, someone intentionally went astray from God and refused to offer the sacrifice, he was to be cut off from the people. If a person blatantly turns away from God and His Word, he will kill his spiritual life and all the blessings of God.

AREA OF OBEDIENCE #4 – If you want God’s blessings, realize God’s law is to be obeyed and there are serious consequences if not obeyed. **15:32-36**

AREA OF INSTRUCTION #5 – If you want God’s blessings, you must pursue a separated Holiness. **15:37-41**

The chapter ends by reminding the Israel that you do not govern your life by your own feelings, heart or eyes. You govern your life by the Word of God. In fact, God says put tassels on your garments and when you look at them, remember the responsibility to obey God’s Word.

Summary: If we want God to continue to bless us:

- 1) We must always want to give more and do more.
- 2) We must maintain a reverent worship.
- 3) We must immediately resolve sin matters.
- 4) We must not defiantly pursue sin.
- 5) We must purpose to be Holy.

Peter Wallace: Cult and Culture: Life in the Land, Part 1

Our passage tonight is structured by a threefold use of the phrase, “*The LORD spoke to Moses*” (v1, v17, v37). The passage starts with a discussion of the centrality of worship – **verses 1-16** give the basic rule for how Israel to bring their offerings to the LORD; and while our worship has changed in many ways, the basic principles remain intact.

Then **verses 17-36** focus on the application of those principles in two situations:

- 1) the first part of the dough,
- 2) and then, at the heart of the passage, the question of “unintentional” sins.

And finally, **verses 37-41** encourage Israel to develop cultural practices that will reinforce the way of life that God has commanded.

1. Life Before God: the Basic Rule for Offerings (v1-16)

As we have seen before, the **burnt offering** is the declaration that we are here to worship God – the burnt offerings declare that we belong entirely to God. We often use the word “sacrifice” indiscriminately to refer to all the animal offerings, but throughout the OT, the word sacrifice usually refers to a particular offering – namely, the **peace offering**. And the sacrifice of the peace offering is a joyful declaration that we now have peace with God – shalom has come to God’s people.

Verses 4-10 then describe the **grain offerings** and **drink offerings** that should accompany the burnt offering and the sacrifice (the vow offering or peace offering).

But as we talk about the relationship between “cult” and “culture” it is worth noting that the relationship is reciprocal: the fruits and products of human culture are at the center of what God requires in worship. But also notice this: God does not call for Israel to bring him everything in their culture! There are no vegetables here – nor other products,

like garments or tools or handicrafts. This is the point of sacraments. **God selects certain things and makes them holy.**

2. Special Circumstances (v17-36)

Verses 17-36 then launch the second section of our chapter – as God applies these principles of worship in two specific ways.

- a. The Contribution of the First Portion to God (v17-21)
- b. Dealing with Sin (v22-36)
 - i. Unintentional Sins of the Congregation (v22-26)
 - ii. Unintentional Sins of an Individual (v27-29)
 - iii. High-Handed Sins of an Individual (v30-31)
 - iv. Case Study: the Sabbath-breaker (v32-36)

3. Wearing Tassels: the Case for Christian Culture (v37-41)

What are the practices and customs by which we remind ourselves and one another of our calling to be holy? Practices and customs may vary from place to place and time to time – as Paul points out: *“the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding”* (Romans 14:19)

“Christian culture” does not mean sticking Christian slogans on pop culture. Christian culture means the customs and practices that reflect the gospel of the kingdom – and the worship of the King. Christian culture means living in the midst of this age according to the standards and values of the age to come.

J. Ligon Duncan: The Laws of the Land

I. Grace.

Moses is teaching us in this passage that the believer’s life — if I could say this in a little bit of a flowery, poetic way — the believer’s life is to be lived under the sky of grace. That is, grace is to be a dominating thing under which the believer lives with a constant inescapable awareness.

II. Worship.

There’s a second thing we learn here, though, and it’s something that we learn about worship. The believer is to give the best of everything to God in worship. As we come in to the worship of God, we are bringing the best of all the many things that God has given to us in worship, and giving them as a sacrifice to the Lord—acknowledging that He gave them in the first place, that He’s been very generous in His giving, and that He owns everything that we have. He deserves everything that we have, and so these very generous gifts of sacrifice that are given back to Him are a picture of the way we are to give the best of everything to God in worship.

III. Atonement.

There's a third thing I want you to see, and you see this especially in **verses 22-31**, as we learn something here about atonement. The believer sees the seriousness of sin in two ways in **verses 22-31**. The believer sees the seriousness of sin in atonement (the laws of atonement that are given there), and of course the believer sees the seriousness of sin in judgment, especially the illustration of judgment that will come in **verses 32-36**. All sin requires atonement. All sin requires covering, satisfaction, propitiation, the turning away of God's deserved judgment. All sin requires this. In that atonement, that sin is dealt with either through representative substitutionary satisfaction in which God provides a substitute that bears the deserved judgment, or that sin is dealt with in personal punishment. Now both of those things are illustrated in this passage.

IV. Obedience.

But there's a fourth (and the last) thing that I want you to see as well, and you see it especially in **verses 32-41**. This passage teaches us about obedience. The believer knows that God takes our holiness seriously, and two illustrations of that point are given in this section. The first illustration is given in **verses 32-36**, with the man who openly, blatantly breaks God's Sabbath law in public view in Israel, and who is apprehended and taken to Moses and Aaron to await judgment. This illustrates the seriousness of sin and how seriously God takes our holiness. The man eventually receives the death sentence for his high-handed sin. You remember Moses speaking about the "high-handed sin" in the previous few verses? Well, this is an illustration of that kind of high-handed sin. Nobody in Israel could have said 'You know, did God say anything about this in the Sabbath Day?' No, everybody had heard what God had said to do and not do on the Sabbath Day, and this man just went blithely ahead and did whatever he wanted to do. And in the face of that high-handed sin, he received the sharp judgment of the death penalty. God will judge sin.

Iain DuGuid: The fundamental problem that drove Israel's patterns of sin was their failure to believe that God is good and had good purposes for them. Faced with oversized enemies entrenched in fortified cities, Israel concluded that they would certainly die in any attempt to conquer the land (**14:3**). This is unbelief. In spite of the evidence of the first fruits of the land in the shape of an enormous bunch of grapes (**13:23**), Israel chose instead to believe the majority report of the scouts that the land was bad and that it devoured its inhabitants (**13:32**). This is unbelief. When the Lord condemned them to wander another forty years in the wilderness, they then decided they could conquer the giant-infested land after all, with or without God (**14:40-45**). This is unbelief. Unbelief drove their disobedience. . .

That is why **Numbers 15** makes a fitting sequel to **Numbers 14**. Israel's unbelief and disobedience that led to a broken relationship was not the end of the road for God's relationship with his people. Relationship with him is, after all, the good purpose for which God has designed us. The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us that we were made "to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Or to put it another way, we were created to enjoy a relationship of close fellowship with God. Why was God going to bring Israel into the Promised Land? Was it simply so they could have a beautiful place in which to live, equipped with all of the ancient conveniences? Far from it: entry into

the land was merely the beginning of God's purpose for them. Once they were in the land, Israel would begin to offer these sacrifices, which would then be the means of their experiencing rich fellowship with the living God. Whereas **Numbers 14** showed that disobedience leads to death, **Numbers 15** shows that the doorway to a life-giving relationship with God is still open. If the older generation had truly believed that was God's enduring purpose for them, as Joshua and Caleb did, then they would have been prepared to take on whatever giants they faced in order to enter the land. They would not even have feared death if they had truly believed in God's good purpose of lasting fellowship with himself.

TEXT: Numbers 16:1-35

TITLE: *REVOLT OF KORAH – SPOUTING OFF CAN GET YOU SWALLOWED UP*

BIG IDEA:

LEADERSHIP ENVY STIRS UP UNJUSTIFIED ATTACKS THAT BRING DOWN THE HAMMER OF CATASTROPHIC DIVINE JUDGMENT

INTRODUCTION:

Defying God’s appointed leadership reflects a fatal lack of fear of the Lord. Here we see the arrogance of those who attack Moses and Aaron with a spirit of leadership envy. They cast false accusations and impugn the motives and validity of their leaders. Instead of being content with their appointed ministry roles, they drum up a conspiracy of complainers and rebels and push self-promotion. Their disloyalty seriously disrupts the unity of the community and has devastating consequences on their families.

Raymond Brown: The serious offences described in this story powerfully illustrate the sinister effects of sin. The four dimensions of this offence continue to be relevant in our not-so-different world: disobedience, discontent, disloyalty and disruption.

Iain Duguid: Distrust of those who are in charge is a widespread phenomenon. It is easy to stir up dissension against those in authority, especially when life is difficult and progress is slow. The fans of professional sports teams with losing records often want the managers fired. Aspiring politicians regularly harp on economic difficulties as they attempt to unseat the incumbent. Sometimes the criticism goes deeper and seeks to overturn the existing order completely and replace it with a new and different authority structure. There are indeed times when a change in personnel or the system is justified. Many such revolts, however, are generated by the wrong motivations and aimed at the wrong targets.

Numbers 16 shows us just such a revolt against the leadership in Israel. It was a revolt that combined together two distinct groups of people. On the one hand there was a group made up of Korah and the Levites, while on the other were Dathan and Abiram, who were Reubenites, along with 250 chiefs of the community (**vv. 1 , 2**). Each of these groups had its own distinct target within the authority structures of Israel. Korah and the Levites challenged the religious leadership of Aaron, while Dathan and Abiram with their followers assaulted the civil leadership of Moses. It is not perhaps coincidental that these two groups rebelled together because the Kohathite Levites, from whom Korah came, camped to the south of the tabernacle, on the same side as the Reubenites (**2:10 ; 3:29**). We could therefore call this incident “The Southside Rebellion.”

Gordon Keddie: If we are not spiritually content – that is, in our hearts – then discontented frustration will always fill the gap between our actual situation and our view of where we think we should be.

I. (:1-3) LEADERSHIP ENVY -- REBELLION CONSPIRACY DIRECTED AGAINST GOD AND HIS APPOINTED LEADERS

A. (:1-2) The Conspiracy

1. (:1) Leaders of the Conspiracy

“Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action,”

Gordon Wenham: According to **2:10ff.** and **3:29**, both Reubenites and the Kohathites were to encamp on the south side of the tabernacle. The proximity of their tents explains their mutual involvement and their common fate.

Roy Gane: The fact that the verb “took” (Qal of *lqh*) in **verse 1** has no object has disturbed interpreters for centuries. What does Korah take, along with his associates? The text does not say. However, each instance of the same verb in the rest of the story has one or more censers as its object (**16:6, 17, 18, 39, 46, 47**). The last occurrence (**16:47**) has Aaron’s censer as the contextually implied object, but the word for “censer” is not expressed, just as “took” has no object in **verse 1**. So it appears that the lack in **verse 1** is an intentional literary strategy to get the reader/listener thinking about what Korah wants to take, which we find out later is the **censer of Aaron** that represents his high priestly function.

Iain Duguid: The rebellion in **Numbers 16** is exactly that—a **frontal assault** on the order established by God at the time of the census. That becomes clear when you look more closely at those taking part. The ranks of those rebelling are drawn from the first of the Levites to be counted, the Kohathites (**4:1–3**), the first of the people to be counted—the Reubenites (**1:20, 21**), and those who were doing the counting—the leaders of the community (*nešîê hāēdâ*; **4:34**). What is particularly striking about this group is that the rebellion does not come from the lowest rungs of Israelite society but from the higher rungs. Bearing in mind that status around the tabernacle goes downward as you travel clockwise, from east to south to west to north, it is noteworthy that this is not a northside but a southside rebellion. It is not those at the bottom of the heap who rebel against God’s order but those who are close to the top and who think they ought themselves to be at the top. This marks an escalation from the earlier grumbling that originated among the marginal riff-raff (**11:4**): now grumbling has infected the center of the camp.

2. (:2) Lieutenants of the Conspiracy

“and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.”

B. (:3) The Complaint = Self-Exaltation

“And they assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, ‘You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and

the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?”

Peter Wallace: Moses points out that Korah and his company have missed the point of **chapter 15**. The tassels on their garments do not demonstrate that Israel is **holy**. The tassels on their garments are to remind Israel **to be holy!** “*So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God.*” (15:40) If you are in rebellion against God, then you are not holy, no matter how many tassels you wear!!

Raymond Brown: here is an example of misapplied Scripture. The grumblers told Moses that the whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them (3). Moses would have agreed with his accusers. One of the purposes of the blue tassels on the people’s garments was to encourage holiness of life. If, reminded by the tassels, they obeyed the Lord’s commands, they would be ‘consecrated’ or holy (15:40) to the Lord: the same word as that used by the grumblers here. All the Lord’s people were meant to be holy (3), ‘separated’ to the Lord, with its inevitable corollary that they were ‘separated’ from the things that grieved their God, spoilt their lives, corrupted their neighbours and damaged their witness.

Iain Duguid: This fact further highlights the deceptive agenda in Korah’s speech. As a southsider, part of the leading clan of the Levites, he didn’t really want all social order eliminated: he would actually have had more to lose than most Israelites from such an egalitarian leveling. While declaring all Israelites equally sacred before the Lord, what he really wanted was access for himself to the group that would be above the rest, the priesthood (16:10). Likewise, the Reubenites held a privileged place in the Israelite community; yet that was not enough for them. It still rankled them that their premier place as firstborn of Jacob’s sons had been stripped away because of Reuben’s sins. Like the pigs in George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm*, the southsiders wanted a society in which everyone was equal, with some people (themselves) being “more equal” than others.

Dennis Cole: The common assertion of this mutinous assembly of leaders against Moses and against Aaron was, “*You have gone too far!*” (*rab-lākem*) or literally, “You have [too] much!” **Milgrom** describes this proclamation of the holiness of the entire congregation as “a clever application of the command to ‘be holy’ ” that is found at the conclusion of the previous cycle. The Israelites had been instructed to wear garment tassels as a reminder of their covenant relationship to the Lord, so they might keep his commandments and live holy lives before God and the world. In addition Yahweh had said at Sinai that the children of Israel were to be “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exod 19:6). But those words were based on the faithful obedience to the covenant stipulations and not an unconditional promise. The rejection of the Promised Land in the previous cycle was evidence enough of the people’s forsaking of the special covenant relationship it was to have enjoyed. The group furthermore asserted that Moses and Aaron were self-appointed rather than divinely ordained, an accusation far more true of those registering the complaint. But whereas sanctification in 15:40 was related to the people’s obedience to all God’s commands over against their seeking to

fulfill their own lusts and desires, their rebelliousness had blinded them to their own lack of holiness. As a result this congregation of rebels who rose up in unison would die together, for the earth would soon consume them.

II. (:4-19) LEADERSHIP CONFRONTATION -- RESPONSE OF MOSES SETS UP THE ULTIMATE LEADERSHIP CONFRONTATION

A. (:4-11) Dealing with the Complaint of Korah

1. (:4) Renouncing Self Trust and Self Defense

“When Moses heard this, he fell on his face;”

The natural reaction would be to go toe-to-toe with your adversary and stand up for the validity and authority of your leadership as it is challenged. Moses, the meekest of all men, reacts in opposite fashion. Instead of defending himself, he casts himself on his face before His God.

Timothy Ashley: The probability is that here, as in **ch. 14**, motives of intercession and obeisance before God are present. Moses also undoubtedly needed instruction from Yahweh on how to deal with this crisis. The text does not say how long Moses is prostrate, but when he rises, he has two replies to make, the first to the specific charge raised by Korah and the second to the motive behind it.

2. (:5) Reality Test = Let the Lord Make the Choice

“and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, ‘Tomorrow morning the LORD will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will bring near to Himself.’”

3. (:6-7) Rash Behavior = You Have Crossed the Line

“Do this: take censers for yourselves, Korah and all your company, 7 and put fire in them, and lay incense upon them in the presence of the LORD tomorrow; and the man whom the LORD chooses shall be the one who is holy. You have gone far enough, you sons of Levi!”

Gordon Wenham: Moses proposes that all who claim such a holy status should demonstrate it by undertaking a priestly task, the offering of incense. Since two of Aaron’s sons had died for offering fire which the Lord had not commanded (**Lev. 10:1–2**) Korah’s alacrity in submitting to this test is striking. This will show who is holy and whom the Lord has chosen (**6–7**).

4. (:8-10) Root Problem = Leadership Envy

a. (:8-10a) You Should Appreciate Your Ministry Opportunities

“Then Moses said to Korah, ‘Hear now, you sons of Levi, 9 is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to

stand before the congregation to minister to them; 10 and that He has brought you near, Korah, and all your brothers, sons of Levi, with you?”

Gordon Wenham: Moses then points out that the Levites are **greatly privileged**: The God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself (9). The Levites camped next to the tabernacle separating it off from the other tribes. What is more they had the duty of doing service in the tabernacle, that is dismantling, carrying and erecting the tabernacle. Though Moses does not make the point here, the Kohathites, of whom Korah was one, had the task of carrying the most sacred objects such as the ark (4:1–20). They were next in rank to the priests. But they want the priesthood itself.

b. (:10b) You Should Not Strive to Usurp Other Ministry Functions
“And are you seeking for the priesthood also?”

Raymond Brown: Here is an example also of an envious spirit. Not content with the important subsidiary roles the Lord had assigned to them, these Levites were trying to get the priesthood too (10). The fourth-century bishop Gregory of Nyssa described envy as ‘that congenital malady in the nature of man’. ‘Envy banished us from Paradise, turned Cain into a ruthless murderer and made young Joseph a slave. Envy ... sends the dart against Moses, but it does not reach the height where Moses was’.

Warren Wiersbe: the most important place in the Christian life is the place of God’s choice, the place He’s prepared for us and prepared us to fill. The important thing isn’t status but faithfulness, doing the work God wants us to do. Every member of the church, the body of Christ, has a spiritual gift to be used for serving others, and therefore every member is important to God and to the church (1 Cor. 12:14-18).

5. (:11) Rebellion is Actually Directed Against the Lord

“Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD; but as for Aaron, who is he that you grumble against him?”

Timothy Ashley: The meaning is that in rebelling against the priesthood, Korah is not really rebelling against Aaron, but against Yahweh himself, since Aaron did not put himself over the people, nor did Moses. It was Almighty God who ordained things to be so, and disregarding the Aaronic priesthood is rebellion against him.

Dennis Cole: Moses’ second address to Korah confronts the Levites among the rebellious lot. He strikes at the heart of the matter, pointing to the Levites’ desire for position, power, and prestige instead of being satisfied with the special role God had granted them previously. The Levites had been set apart (*hibdil*) from the other tribes to perform the service of the tabernacle and to be a special possession of the Lord (Num 8:14). Moses asks Korah rhetorically if this special appointment was so insignificant a function that he felt he should aspire to a higher position, which highlights the fact that Korah was acting out of selfish ambition rather than holy intentions. Ultimately,

Korah's company of Levites, Reubenites, and others had joined forces not against Moses and Aaron but against God himself, who had delineated the various appointments to position and responsibility for the Aaronic priests and the Levite assistants. God had "*brought them near*"—given them the privileged access to the tabernacle in their special services—but they desired to seize control of the priesthood.

J. Ligon Duncan: Moses is stunned by their open and arrogant rejection of the rule of God. Understand that this passage is not fundamentally about a challenge to human leadership. You know this is not the passage that the pastor gets to stand up and say, 'Now if you ever disagree with me, you just watch out!' Something much bigger than this is going on, because it is not ultimately Moses and Aaron who are being challenged here: it is God who's being challenged, because God appointed Moses and Aaron, and God was bringing the children of Israel out of Egypt, and God was the one who appointed the priests (the sons of Aaron) as the ones who would minister before Him. So it's not ultimately Moses or Aaron or the priests who are being challenged. It's not ultimately human leadership that's on the line. It's God's leadership that's on the line here.

B. (:12-15) Dealing with the Complaint of Dathan and Abiram

1. (:12a) The Summons

"Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab;"

2. (:12b-14) The Refusal

a. (:12b) Defiant Response

"but they said, 'We will not come up.'"

b. (:13-14) Deflecting Accusations

1) (:13) Accusation of Endangering the Flock and Lording it Over the Flock

"Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us?"

2) (:14a) Accusation of Deception and False Promises

"Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men?"

Gordon Wenham: The Reubenites' complaint is more traditional: they object to the divine programme of journeying to Canaan via the wilderness. Egypt, they say, was a real land of milk and honey, and Moses is incapable of bringing us to Canaan, which he says is a land of milk and honey (13–14; cf. 14:1–9).

Iain Duguid: They asked, "*Will you put out the eyes of these men?*" (v. 14), which is an idiomatic way of saying, "Can you make us blind to the realities we see around us?" In

other words, “You may have tricked everyone else into blindly following you, but we see clearly what you have done.” They were arguing that Moses had deliberately deceived the people for his own ends.

- c. (:14b) Defiant Response
“We will not come up!”

3. (:15) The Angry Appeal to the Lord

*“Then Moses became very angry and said to the LORD,
‘Do not regard their offering! I have not taken a single donkey from
them,
nor have I done harm to any of them.’”*

Timothy Ashley: This was evidently some kind of idiomatic statement that meant that one party had not taken tribute from another nor exalted himself over another.

Roy Gane: Moses has put up with a lot in the past, but the outrageous defamations hurled at him by Dathan and Abiram turn him into an anti-intercessor (**16:15**). This is the only place where the Pentateuch says that Moses was “*very angry*.”

C. (:16-19A) DEALING WITH THE LOGISTICS OF THE CONFRONTATION

1. (:16-17) Man Up

“And Moses said to Korah, ‘You and all your company be present before the LORD tomorrow, both you and they along with Aaron. 17 And each of you take his firepan and put incense on it, and each of you bring his censer before the LORD, two hundred and fifty firepans; also you and Aaron shall each bring his firepan.’”

2. (:18) Mano a Mano

“So they each took his own censer and put fire on it, and laid incense on it; and they stood at the doorway of the tent of meeting, with Moses and Aaron.”

3. (:19a) Multitude in Support

“Thus Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the doorway of the tent of meeting.”

D. (:19b) DEAL BREAKER = PRESENCE OF THE GLORY OF THE LORD

“And the glory of the LORD appeared to all the congregation.”

Warren Wiersbe: The next morning, Korah and his followers showed up with their censers and stood with Moses and Aaron at the entrance of the tabernacle, while Dathan and Abiram stood with their families at the doors of their tents on the south side of the tabernacle.

III. (:20-30) LITMUS TEST -- PREPARATION FOR DIVINE JUDGMENT TO SETTLE THE CONFRONTATION

A. (:20-22) **Intercession of Moses and Aaron**

1. (:20-21) Anger of the Lord – Ready to Destroy the Entire Congregation
“Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 21 ‘Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.’”

Peter Wallace: The issue in this chapter has been **separation**. In v9, Moses had said, is not enough that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation? (**Numbers 8:14** had used the same word to speak of the separation of the Levites to their service of the tabernacle). But now the LORD says to Moses and Aaron – *“Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.”*

2. (:22) Argument of Moses and Aaron – Limit the Scope of Judgment
“But they fell on their faces, and said, ‘O God, Thou God of the spirits of all flesh, when one man sins, wilt Thou be angry with the entire congregation?’”

Dennis Cole: This form of address in Moses’ prayer emphasizes that God is the creator, giver, sustainer, and sovereign Lord over all flesh, especially the humanity whose lives were suspended over the fulcrum of life and death due to their sinful actions (cf. **Isa 42:5; Zech 12:1**). Moses’ subsequent plea therefore was an appeal to God’s mercy, longsuffering, pardoning grace, and forgiveness (cf. **Num 14:17–20**).

B. (:23-30) **Imminent Judgment Warning**

1. (:23-24) Divine Command to Issue the Warning
“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 24 ‘Speak to the congregation, saying, ‘Get back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”
2. (:25-30) Declaration of Imminent Judgment
 - a. (:25-27) Keep a Safe Distance
“Then Moses arose and went to Dathan and Abiram, with the elders of Israel following him, 26 and he spoke to the congregation, saying, ‘Depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, lest you be swept away in all their sin.’ 27 So they got back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the doorway of their tents, along with their wives and their sons and their little ones.”
 - b. (:28-30) Know that my Leadership Authority is from the Lord
“And Moses said, ‘By this you shall know that the LORD has sent

me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing. 29 If these men die the death of all men, or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me. 30 But if the LORD brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the LORD.”

Roy Gane: In the Bible only God can create (*br*). Ironically, this present unprecedented miracle of creation will be for destruction.

IV. (:31-35) LAST WORD -- CATASTROPHIC DIVINE JUDGMENT SILENCES THE REBELLION

A. (:31-34) Seismic Swallowing – Unprecedented Catastrophe

1. (:31-32) Targeted Unprecedented Catastrophe

“Then it came about as he finished speaking all these words, that the ground that was under them split open; 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah, with their possessions.”

Dennis Cole: Though Korah’s name is not mentioned here in the judgment, the second census informs us that his fate was the same as that of Dathan and Abiram (**26:10**).

Num. 26:11 is an indication that this judgment did not include everyone in all of their households.

Eugene Merrill: The fact that the wives and children of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram were included in the awful judgment of God (**vv. 27, 32**) illustrates again the Old Testament principle of family solidarity and the collective punishment if not guilt of the offspring of those who sin against God (**Ex. 20:5-6; 34:6-7; Josh. 7:16-26**).

2. (:33) Terminal Unprecedented Catastrophe

“So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.”

3. (:34) Terrifying Unprecedented Catastrophe

“And all Israel who were around them fled at their outcry, for they said, ‘The earth may swallow us up!’”

B. (:35) Consuming Fire

“Fire also came forth from the LORD and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.”

Gordon Wenham: Finally, almost as an afterthought, the death of Korah's supporters is mentioned. The writer felt no need to elaborate. If Aaron's sons perished for offering incense that was not commanded (**Lev. 10:1-2**), how much less likely to escape were the followers of Korah, who were not even priests (cf. **Jude 11**).

Iain Duguid: If the swallowing alive of Dathan and Abiram and their families was visible disproof of their claim that the Lord was either dead or irrelevant, then the fire from the tabernacle that consumed Korah's 250 priestly pretenders was visible disproof of Korah's claim of priestly equality (v. **35**). He had said that all Israel was holy and could safely approach the Lord; yet when the claim was tested, it was found false. Only those whom God had chosen could approach him safely; all others would die, just as he had warned them earlier (**3:10, 38**). The remains of the bronze censers with which they had tried to offer incense were hammered into an overlay for the altar of sacrifice as a permanent reminder of this state of affairs (v. **39**). Only the one whom God had chosen could draw near to him. There is no truth in the claim that all roads lead to God. Apart from the one he has chosen, all roads lead to a consuming fire.

Ronald Allen: The 250 men were then devoured by fire (perhaps lightning); the smell of their incense would not be able to cover that of their stinking, burning flesh.

Gordon Keddie: The punishment fitted the crime in each case. Dathan and Abiram had unjustly complained that Moses intended to kill them in the desert. For their unbelief, the desert opened up and swallowed them. Korah and his 250 aspired to the Aaronic priesthood and were consumed in their presumption by the fire of God (**16:31-35; Leviticus 10:1-2; Jude 11**). Sin, like Moloch, consumes here children. Specific sins have specific consequences. Spiritual death begets eternal death.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How content are you with your spiritual giftedness and with the role that God wants you to play in His church program? What are some wrong motives for serving God?
- 2) How does a revolt against God's appointed spiritual leadership gain momentum and become a serious threat?
- 3) What are some of the false charges and false assumptions and faulty thinking of the ringleaders in this conspiracy?
- 4) Why does Moses react the way that he does?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Gordon Wenham: The section [chs. 16-19] begins with a group of three stories establishing Aaron's role as high-priest: 16:1–35, the rebellion of Korah; 16:36–50, Aaron halts the plague; 17:1–13, Aaron's rod. The stories not only have the same theme, they have similar structures. The first two begin with the people protesting against Moses and Aaron and conclude with a divine judgment punishing the protesters and vindicating Aaron. The third inverts this sequence: God proposes a test of Aaron's standing and it ends with the people crying out for Moses. Most striking is the fact that each of these tests of Aaron's call takes two days.

Raymond Brown: Some means had to be found whereby the ministry of Aaron and Moses could be publicly authenticated. With dramatic irony, these discontented Levites who were '*trying to get the priesthood too*' (10) were to act out their covetous dreams by an exclusively priestly function. Korah and his partners were to appear at the Tent of Meeting, each bearing a censer with fire and incense in it (18). Once again, a biblical narrative serves a theological purpose; the means by which the recognized priests were authenticated presents some rich aspects of the doctrine of God.

First, God is **patient**. The 250 malcontents were told on one day what was to happen on the next. They were to appear before the LORD tomorrow (16). Here was an opportunity for them to reflect on the seriousness of their offence, their opposition to God's revealed will, the hurt they were causing to their leaders and the damage they were inflicting on the community. There was time to repent.

Secondly, God is **holy**. At such a sick display of human arrogance, the glory of the LORD appeared (19). This rebellious demonstration of human sinfulness was made all the more heinous when contrasted with and exposed by God's holiness. The bright light of his shekinah presence was seen by everyone gathered there, and its radiant outshining made these rebellious malcontents all the more sinful. Sin is seen for the ugly thing it is when God reveals his glory. Isaiah experienced that revelation in the Jerusalem temple; acknowledging God's holiness, he realized he had offended the Lord by his '*unclean lips*'.

Thirdly, God is **powerful**. These 250 disgruntled men with censers in their hands set themselves in fierce opposition to Moses and Aaron. The two leaders were totally outnumbered, but the protecting glory of the LORD appeared to the entire assembly (19). God's shekinah glory had appeared earlier when Moses and his colleagues were in grave danger (14:10), and here God's presence was manifest again at a time of evident need. It was also visible the following day, when the whole community rose up in further opposition to Moses and Aaron (42). The cloud that had shielded the Lord's people (9:15–23) now came to defend the Lord's servants.

Fourthly, God is **righteous**. The overshadowing cloud of God's glory was seen by the entire assembly. God told his servants to stand aside from the crowd so that he might reveal himself in judgment and put an end to them at once (21). Such a serious sin

demanded drastic action if it was not to spread and lead to outright anarchy throughout the Israelite camp. When people are determined to treat the LORD with contempt (**30**), it cannot be passed unnoticed.

Fifthly, God is **merciful**. Moses and Aaron pleaded that innocent people might not suffer alongside the discontented offenders. They appealed to God as the Lord of unlimited compassion. He was the God of the spirits of all mankind (**22**), not just the God of Moses and Aaron. He had declared his covenant love for all the Israelite community and, although they were in danger of being infected by Korah's rebellion, why should the entire assembly suffer because one man had sinned in this way?

Iain Duguid: The same misunderstandings often rear their heads in the contemporary church. Some want leadership in the church for the prestige it brings, and some are quick to criticize if results seem less impressive than another church down the road. Biblical leaders, however, serve because God has called them to that position and recognize that sometimes even those whom God has called may not see dramatic visible results. The prophet Isaiah had as clear a call to preach from the Lord as possible, yet in the very next breath he was informed that few would respond to his ministry (**Isaiah 6:9, 10**). Pragmatic thinking will often find godly leadership unimpressive. This should not surprise us or dishearten us, for we follow the way of the cross, in which God's power is made all the more evident by the personal weakness of those whom God has chosen as his leaders (see **2 Corinthians 4:1–11**). Our shortcomings make the glory of God's grace shine out all the more clearly.

David Thompson: In any society blessed by God, there must be God-ordained and appointed leadership and there must be proper subordination to that leadership. The leadership has the responsibility to obey the Word of God and the people have the responsibility to submit to the leadership obeying the Word of God.

But when we study the Bible, we discover that some people don't like that. That is true in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Absalom didn't like it. He wanted authority from his father David (**II Sam. 15**). Diotrephes didn't like it; he wanted preeminence in the local church (**III John 9-10**). Satan didn't like it, in fact, that is what got him expelled from heaven.

It does not matter the dispensation, if anyone decides they are going to try to undermine and overthrow and impeach a leader who has been sovereignly appointed by God, it will not end good for them.

This is a very famous story in the book of Numbers that truly shows this point. In fact, in the New Testament, Jude actually refers to this story and actually names Korah as an example of a self-seeking, arrogant man, who was executed and perished as a judgment of God (**Jude 11-12**). That story is told right here in **Numbers 16** and the lesson is simple to see:

PEOPLE WHO ATTEMPT TO OVERRIDE AND OVERTHROW GOD'S AUTHORITY AND LEADERSHIP WILL FACE GOD'S SERIOUS JUDGMENT.

Numbers 16 describes a major rebellion against the God-ordained and God-appointed leadership of Moses and Aaron. In fact, this was a rebellion that had impeachment in view. They wanted Moses and Aaron out of office and they wanted to overthrow them. This was a very real and very serious attempt to overthrow God's leaders so God sent one of the most ferocious judgments against those who did the wrong.

PART #1 – Korah and company rise up against Moses and Aaron. 16:1-3

In fact, they falsely accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves. Moses and Aaron never exalted themselves; Moses didn't even want the job of leading Israel; but God is the One who chose him and gave him the position. **Dr. Warren Wiersbe** made a very interesting observation about this. He said whenever you have people complaining and rebelling against God's leader, there is usually a **stated reason** and then there is a **hidden reason** (*Be Counted*, p. 91). The stated reason was these two were running things when there should be more of a congregational democracy. The hidden reason was Korah was jealous and wanted to be priest.

PART #2 – Moses responds to Korah and his company of rebels. 16:4-18

When Korah did this, Moses had five main responses:

Response #1 - Moses fell on his face. **16:4**

Response #2 - Moses spoke to Korah and his rebel group. **16:5-11**

Response #3 - Moses calls Dathan and Abiram to appear before him. **16:12-14**
Moses called Dathan and Abiram to appear, but they would not do it. This is the way spiritual weasels work. They want to hide out and not face the music. They decided they would not go. Instead they railed against Moses and said you are the one who has led us up out of Egypt and brought us into this wilderness and all you want to do is lord your power over us (v. 13). In **verse 14**, they continue to run their mouths against what they considered to be the "failed leadership of Moses."

Response #4 - Moses responds to Dathan and Abiram by praying to God. **16:15**
I love one commentator who said, "Moses the meek man becomes Moses the angry man." The one thing a man of God can always do is pray and name the person doing harm. That is exactly what Moses does; He asks God not to accept their offerings that He would appease His wrath. Moses said I have not taken one thing from him nor have I done any harm to them. Moses did not want these two ever connected to him or those sacrifices ever again.

Response #5 - Moses responds to Korah and his company. **16:16-18**

Moses reinforced the idea that they need to bring a fire pan with incense on it to the tent of meeting the next day. Moses says you bring your arrogance and your

firepans to the doorway of the tent of meeting tomorrow and we will see who is right with God and who isn't.

PART #3 – Korah and the congregation assembled themselves and the glory of God appeared. 16:19

PART #4 – God spoke to Moses and Aaron. 16:20-22

This is so interesting because God does not even speak to Korah and his rebels. He spoke to Moses and Aaron and He said get away from them because I am going to instantly kill them. Moses and Aaron fell on their faces and appealed that God would not do that because of one arrogant man Korah.

PART #5 – God spoke to Moses again. 16:23-24

God is speaking to Moses, not these arrogant self-appointed leaders. God told Moses to tell the congregation to get back from around the dwelling places of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.

PART #6 – Moses went with the elders of Israel to the home of Dathan and Abiram. 16:25-30

PART #7 – God executes all those who rebelled against Moses and Aaron. 16:31-35

Steven Cole: Serving God Wrongly or Rightly

**We serve God wrongly when we serve for ourselves,
but rightly when we serve for Him.**

Motive is everything in our service for the Lord. Why do you do what you do for Him? Often your true motives are uncovered when you feel that you should have a higher position of service or more recognition than the church has given to you. You resent those in leadership and think that you could do a better job if you only had the chance. The text reveals four ways that we can serve wrongly, as exemplified by these rebels; and, four ways to serve rightly, as seen in Moses and Aaron.

1. We serve God wrongly when we desire power and prestige for ourselves, but rightly when we're content with the gifts He has entrusted to us, using them to serve Him.

A. We serve God wrongly when we desire power and prestige for ourselves.

B. We serve God rightly when we're content with the gifts He has entrusted to us, using them to serve Him.

2. We serve God wrongly when we do not fear Him, but rightly when we fear Him above all.

A. We serve God wrongly when we do not fear Him.

Moses fell on his face because he rightly feared the Lord. If the rebels had even a twinge of fear for the Lord, they would have responded to Moses' challenge by saying, "Uh oh! We're literally toast if we go through with this challenge!" Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, who were legitimate priests by birth, had taken "strange fire" in their censers and offered it before the Lord. Instantly fire came out from the Lord and consumed them (**Lev. 10:1-3**). These rebels, who weren't of priestly lineage, should have connected the dots between that incident and Moses' challenge and fallen on their faces in repentance. But they didn't.

B. We serve God rightly when we fear Him above all.

3. We serve God wrongly when we are not submissive to proper authority, but rightly when we serve in submission to His properly appointed leaders.

A. We serve God wrongly when we are not submissive to proper authority.

B. We serve God rightly when we serve in submission to His properly appointed leaders.

4. We serve God wrongly when we don't care about God's people, but rightly when we care about His people even when they treat us wrongly.

A. We serve God wrongly when we don't care about God's people.

It's evident that the rebels only cared about themselves. Their pretext was that they wanted equality for everyone, but their real motive was that they wanted more power and prestige for their own glory. Preachers who take advantage of people by using their donations so that they can live a luxurious lifestyle are not serving God. They're false prophets who are serving themselves at others' expense (**2 Pet. 2:14-15; 1 Tim. 6:5**)!

B. We serve God rightly when we care about His people even when they treat us wrongly.

Although Moses was one of the greatest and most godly leaders of all time, he had to deal with constant grumbling among the people. He had many reasons to ask God to wipe out these ungrateful people, but he didn't succumb to that temptation. With Korah's rebellion he and Aaron asked the Lord to spare the rest of the congregation (**Num. 16:22**). With the rebellion of the entire congregation, Moses directed Aaron to take his censer and make atonement for them, so that the plague would be limited. Aaron ran to save lives! Even with this intervention, 14,700 died, besides those who died on account of Korah (**Num. 16:49**). They cared for these rebellious people even when they had falsely accused them.

TEXT: Numbers 16:36-50

TITLE: WHO GETS TO BURN THE INCENSE BEFORE THE LORD?
ONE TRUE MEDIATOR BETWEEN GOD AND MEN

BIG IDEA:
**THE WORK OF ATONEMENT AND PROPITIATION BELONG ONLY TO
THE DIVINELY APPOINTED HIGH PRIEST AND MEDIATOR**

INTRODUCTION:

As we study this passage we must keep in focus the parallels to the ministry of Jesus Christ as our great High Priest and the only Mediator between God and men. He is the one who has shed His blood and stood in the gap between life and death to save us from our sins. He is the one who has accomplished our Atonement and is the Propitiation for our sins. He is the one who has Reconciled us to a holy God. He is the one who currently makes Intercession for us before the throne of the Father. We need to identify the false mediators that are crying out for our loyalty and affections. We need to guard against usurpers of the role that only Jesus Christ can play in our lives.

Dennis Cole: In the English Bible this passage is the natural conclusion of the Korah rebellion, and hence **chap. 16** continues, whereas in the Hebrew Bible **17:1** (= **16:36** English) begins a new chapter that includes the making of the hammered bronze covering for the altar from the material of the 250 censers and the final test to confirm the Aaronic priesthood. In both cases there is continuity in the narrative ample to warrant either division. Both the Hebrew and the English chapters commence with the familiar introductory phrase of divine speech, *wayēdabbēr YHWH 'el-mōšeh lē'mōr*, one of the key phrases for the organization and the theology of the entire biblical book. Divinely ordained instruction is given to the priestly leadership through the prophetic servant Moses, whose position and authority have just been vindicated. Now the time has come for the full confirmation of the Aaronic priesthood.

Timothy Ashley: The second story in the section grows immediately out of the previous one and draws a lesson from it. It breaks down into two constituent scenes (**16:36–40, 41–50**). The first scene answers the question of what happened to the two hundred fifty censers used by Korah and his congregation. The assumption might be made that they were destroyed by fire (**16:35**), but the text explains that they were holy and hence a holy priest needed to dispose of them. These vessels are made into a bronze cover for the altar of incense. This cover is to function as a “*sign*” (*'ôl*) and a “*reminder*” (*zikkārôn*) that only Aaronic priests may offer incense. Those who violate this prescription risk suffering like Korah. Therefore, the primary lesson of the whole of **16:1–35** is drawn here.

A further aftermath is found in (**16:41–50**). This subsection plays on two common themes: the disobedience or rebellion of the Israelites and the intercession of the leaders

for the people. . . These two scenes function together as a demonstration of the sole sufficiency of the Aaronic priesthood to deal with God for the people.

Matthew Henry: Observe especially, that Aaron was a **type of Christ**. There is an infection of sin in the world, which only the cross and intercession of Jesus Christ can stay and remove. He enters the defiled and dying camp. He stands between the dead and the living; between the eternal Judge and the souls under condemnation. We must have redemption through His blood, even the remission of sins. We admire the ready devotion of Aaron: shall we not bless and praise the unspeakable grace and love which filled the Saviour's heart, when he placed himself in our stead, and bought us with his life? Greatly indeed hath God commended his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Warren Wiersbe: In his farewell message to the Ephesian elders (**Acts 20:28-31**), Paul warned about proud people who would seek to seize authority in the local church and promote themselves. It's likely that more churches have been divided because of arrogant leadership than because of false doctrine.

I. (:36-40) FALSE MEDIATORS LEAD US DOWN THE PATHWAY TO EXPERIENCING THE WRATH OF GOD – THE SIGN CREATED FROM THE CENSERS OF THE DEAD USURPERS TO HIGHLIGHT HOLINESS

A. (:36-38) Reclaim the Censers for God's Holy Purpose

1. (:36-37) Noteworthy Aspect of the Censers = Holy to God

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 37 ‘Say to Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, that he shall take up the censers out of the midst of the blaze, for they are holy; and you scatter the burning coals abroad.’”

Roy Gane: The incineration of the 250 chieftains (**Num. 16:35**), “*who sinned at the cost of their lives*” (**16:38**), created a problem. While the men were perishable, their censers were not. These objects were consecrated by the same divine fire that consumed those who wielded them. Therefore they had to stay at the sanctuary, but what could be done with them?

God's solution is to have Eleazar, son of Aaron, retrieve the censers from the charred human remains and have them hammered out as a supplementary plating to overlay the outer altar. This plating will serve as a warning to any inclined to freelance priestly activities (**16:36–40**). Eleazar is in charge of the Levites responsible for guarding the sanctuary (**3:32**). The Lord has done the dirty work of executing encroachers for him (cf. **3:10, 38**), but Eleazar still has to clean up the mess afterward.

Ronald Allen: Perhaps the most chilling incident in the narrative is the description of the true priests taking the censers of the 250 deceased impostors from their charred remains and employing these holy instruments in hammered bronze sheets for the altar (**v. 38**). Can you imagine the scene? True priests are picking among the bodies,

charred flesh, stench, smoke, smoldering embers, and twisted parts. . .

Even with the death of the false priests, the holy things had to be treated as holy things. This is amazing! The men were wicked and had to be destroyed; the implements were holy and needed to be preserved! From that time on the sheet of bronze over the altar would be a memorial of the utter folly of the self-proclaimed priest of the most holy God (v. 40).

MacArthur: The censers were holy to the Lord since they had been used in the tabernacle.

2. (:38) New Application for the Bronze Metal = Sign of God's Holiness

“As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered sheets for a plating of the altar, since they did present them before the LORD and they are holy; and they shall be for a sign to the sons of Israel.”

Dennis Cole: The outer casing would serve as a reminder of the sanctity of the tabernacle, the supremacy of the Aaronic priesthood, and the seriousness of encroaching upon the holy sanctuary. Any attempt at profaning the holiness of the sanctuary, whether by unrighteous acts (Nadab and Abihu) or by unqualified personnel would be judged severely. How this covering fit in relation to the original bronze covering (**Exod 27:2; 38:2**) remains unexplained. But the object lesson is self-evident, as are others in the Book of Numbers: tassels on garments were a reminder to be obedient to the commandments of God (**Num 15:37–41**), Aaron's rod was a sign not to grumble against the Lord and his anointed (**Num 17:10**), and the bronze serpent was a sign for deliverance from snakebite (**21:4–9**).

The coals from the collected censers were scattered outside the camp so as to not render others impure by contact with the remnants of the dead. In **chap. 19** purification from ritual uncleanness brought about by contact or proximity to the dead is addressed. Many Israelites in the aftermath of this judgment would need ceremonial cleansing to be able to come before the Lord.

B. (:39-40) Remind the Sons of Israel to Approach God Only on His Terms

“So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers which the men who were burned had offered; and they hammered them out as a plating for the altar, 40 as a reminder to the sons of Israel that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the LORD; that he might not become like Korah and his company-- just as the LORD had spoken to him through Moses.”

Gordon Wenham: The importance of visual aids to prevent men sinning is an important theme in this section of Numbers. The tassels on garments (**15:38–41**) and Aaron's rod (**17:10**) also serve the same purpose (cf. **Exod. 13:9; 31:13, 17; Deut. 6:8; 11:18; Josh. 4:7**).

II. (:41-50) ONLY THE TRUE MEDIATOR CAN SAVE US FROM GOD'S WRATH –

THE EFFICACY OF THE CENSER IN THE HAND OF THE TRUE PRIEST

A. (:41) The Congregation: Accusing God's Appointed Leaders Falsely

1. Slow Learners – had not learned their lesson

“But on the next day”

Warren Wiersbe: “But what experience and history teach us is this, that peoples and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.” So wrote the German philosopher **Hegel** in the introduction to his *Philosophy of History*, and he was right. The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history, and that includes church history.

2. Safety in Numbers?? NO!

“all the congregation of the sons of Israel”

3. Still Grumbling Against God's Appointed Leaders

“grumbled against Moses and Aaron,”

4. Shifting Blame

“saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD's people.’”

B. (:42-45) The Lord: Addressing Moses with the Urgent Warning of Imminent Judgment

1. (:42) God Shows Up

“It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the LORD appeared.”

Dennis Cole: This second complaint of the people brought a second theophany as they gathered at the entrance to the tabernacle. The glory of the Lord descended upon the sanctuary for the second successive day. **Milgrom** suggests that the pillar of fire within the cloud, which continually covered the sanctuary when it was stationary, intensified so as to be seen in its brilliance during the daytime, since the fire was normally visible during the night. The cloud that had directed them thus far through the desert, giving hope for the future, now became an ominous sign of what was about to occur.

2. (:43-45) God Warns Moses and Aaron

a. Servants of God Addressed

“Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting,”

b. Wrath of God Impending

“and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.’”

Dennis Cole: As Moses and Aaron went to the entrance to the tabernacle, the Lord instructed Moses to get away (lit. “*rise up from the midst*”) from the vicinity of the defiant crowd so that he could annihilate them. Yet as before (16:20–21), Moses instead fell upon his face in subservience and prayer before the Lord, always a true servant of the people. By this action he also was putting himself at risk of judgment, but God is continually mindful and willing to respond to the submissive hearts of his faithful servants.

c. Fear of God Displayed / Intercessory Appeal
“*Then they fell on their faces.*”

Roy Gane: Moses and Aaron fall on their faces (16:45b). They have been doing that a lot lately (see 14:5; 16:4, 22). But now there is no time even for a short prayer of intercession. Moses perceives that the Lord’s cup of retributive justice has already overflowed, even though he and Aaron have not gotten out of the way. Only Aaron’s rapidly mobile mediation with incense saves the community from extermination (16:46–48).

C. (:46-50) Aaron (Instructed by Moses): Arresting the Plague by Making Atonement

1. (:46) Proper Use of Censer by Genuine Priest

“*And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the LORD, the plague has begun!’*”

Incense was symbolic of prayer.

Dennis Cole: While in this posture Moses directed Aaron to take (*qah*) the censer and place fiery coals from the altar in it and add incense so as to make atonement (*kappēr*) for the sinful murmuring of the people, thus attempting to avert the imminent destruction of all of those assembled. Here the term *kpr* clearly means “propitiation” or “appeasement of the wrath of God.” In the cultic contexts of the ancient Near East, incense often was offered to pacify or appease the wrath of gods and goddesses and soothe their spirits. Incense enhanced the sweet smelling aroma of burning sacrifices that ascended into the heavens, symbolically entering into the nostrils of God (or the gods).

2. (:47) Urgent Need to Make Atonement for the People

“*Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people.*”

Roy Gane: Numbers 16:46–48 indicates that ritual incense could also have an expiatory function. Aaron carried incense in a censer outside the tabernacle to expiate

for (*kipper 'al*) the Israelites so that a lethal outbreak of divine wrath would halt. This case suggests the possibility that regularly sweetening the atmosphere inside the tabernacle may also have had some kind of expiatory function, mitigating the invasive “stench” of Israel’s pollution to the Lord, who dwelt with his people “*in the midst of their uncleanness*” (Lev. 16:16).

3. (:48) Arresting the Plague

“And he took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked.”

4. (:49) Death Toll

“But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah.”

5. (:50) Completion of the Priestly Intervention

“Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked.”

Ronald Allen: Verse 50 is a salutary vindication of the role that God had given to these two men. Despite repeated attempts by powerful persons to wrest away from them their special place in the work of God, there they stand, two old men, blessed of the Lord.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What is the role of a **Mediator** in the spiritual context between God and man?
- 2) What are some of the **signs** that the Lord has established for His people today to remind us of His holiness?
- 3) What lessons should we be learning from the **history** of the Israelites so that we learn to obey God today rather than continually fall into the same sinful traps?
- 4) Do we have a sense of **urgency** that the plague of God’s wrath against sin is right now striking down people we know who desperately need the gospel message in their lives so that they can come to Jesus as their true Mediator?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Raymond Brown: Atonement is crucial. God’s anger was forcefully expressed when the assembled people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron (42). The Lord told the leaders he wanted to put an end to the rebels, and the two men fell face down (45),

pleading with God for his merciful intervention. Acting swiftly, Moses urged Aaron to take up a censer and go into the presence of the recalcitrant assembly. It was a matter of extreme urgency; every passing minute, people were collapsing with plague that spread ferociously among the people. Aaron ran into their midst to make atonement for them (46).

Israel's high priest stood between the living and the dead until the plague stopped (48), an arresting picture of an infinitely greater Mediator. God's Son entered a rebellious world where people were indifferent to the power and consequences of sin, and its effects infinitely worse than the deadliest plague, but he made atonement for them (47). By his sacrificial death upon the cross, he stands between the living and the dead; our response to his saving work determines whether we shall live with him forever or pass to a lost eternity.

Dennis Cole: Note the symmetry and literary developments in the following chiasmic inclusio:

- A Gathering at the Tent of Meeting (v. 42a)
- B Glory of the Lord Appears (vv. 42b–43)
- C Move Away Instructions (v. 45)
- D Censer Preparation Instructions (v. 46a)
- E Aaron to Hurry into the Assembly (v. 46b)
- F Make Atonement for the Plague (v. 46c)
- E' Aaron Ran into the Assembly (v. 47)
- D' Incense Offered for Atonement (v. 47b)
- C' Stood between Living and Dead (v. 48a)
- B' Plague Stopped with 14,700 Dead (vv. 48b–49)
- A' Aaron Returned to the Tent of Meeting (v. 50)

Charlie Garrett: The Mediator Between God and Men

Israel was chosen from among the nations to be God's own special people and to receive His favor. All other nations went their own way, and they lived and died apart from God. Only Israel was set apart to bring in Messiah, and until He came, only they received the atonement necessary to cover their sins in a temporary manner.

It has already been demonstrated that there was to be but one high priest, and until his death prevented him from continuing on, it was his responsibility to mediate between God and man, and to intercede on behalf of his people.

That was challenged by Korah, and the challenge failed. And it wasn't by human effort that it failed. It was because the Lord personally acted and destroyed him and his followers. It set the example for Israel, and Israel sets the typology for Christ to come.

Because God rejected any but Aaron, or his replacement from his line, then it is a message that the Lord was sending to us – “I will accept mediation for your sins, but I will only do so through one Person, My designated High Priest.” That is then explicitly

repeated in the New Testament. First by Jesus Himself in John 14:6, and then by Paul in 1 Timothy 2, our text verse of the day...

Text Verse: *“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, 6 who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” 1 Timothy 2:5, 6*

I. A Sign to Israel (verses 36-40)

The coals and incense were not that which was approved by the Lord for use in the sanctuary. The men brought fire which was not first sanctified through the Lord, and they added incense which was not approved for service of the Lord. Thus, these things failed to anticipate Christ in their makeup, and were unacceptable to be offered to the Lord.

Because of this, they were to be taken from the sanctuary and scattered out at a suitable distance to indicate the rejection of the offerings of these wicked men who had not been consecrated to serve before the Lord, and yet who arrogantly assumed that they could do so.

They failed to see that everything associated with the tabernacle, even to the finest detail, wasn't simply for show, but it was given to prefigure the coming Messiah – His redemptive work, and our position in Him – because of what He has done. . .

Korah was a Levite, but he was not a priest because he did not descend from Aaron. That was made explicit in the law, and yet he presumptuously came forward, along with the other rebels, and tried to usurp the priesthood. The **sign** of the bronze covering was to be used as a **memorial** to bring to mind the consequences of violating the law of the priesthood.

I. The Very Next Day (verses 41-50)

Atonement is normally made through a blood sacrifice, but the idea here is that in the burning of the incense upon the holy fire, there would be removal and purification. . .

The offering of Aaron is accepted because he was the qualified representative, with the proper censer, the proper coals, and the proper incense. Christ stands, even now, between the dead and the living for His people. . .

At one point is the High Priest, the Lawgiver, the Sacrifice, and the Door to God's paradise. All of that is seen in the Person of Jesus. It is He who has stopped the plague upon fallen man, and it is He who will stop that plague which still comes after and destroys Israel. The slaughter continues, but someday, He will stand in their midst and His offering will be the dividing line between the dead and the living. For them, it will finally be the diffusing of the fragrance of Life, leading to life.

<http://superiorword.org/numbers-16-36-50-the-mediator-between-god-and-men/>

TEXT: Numbers 17:1-13

TITLE: *THE SIGN OF AARON'S BUDDING ROD*

BIG IDEA:

GOD VALIDATES HIS APPOINTED SPIRITUAL LEADER TO SHUT THE MOUTHS OF DISPUTERS

INTRODUCTION:

The issue continues to be the validity of the uniqueness of the high priestly role of Aaron. The Israelites, despite previous revelation from God that should have been clear and convicting, continue their practice of murmuring and complaining against God's appointed leadership. God appears to be fed up with their disputing and discontent and orchestrates a miracle-based validation procedure that will highlight Aaron as His clear choice. Once again we see that ministry appointment and empowerment comes from divine appointment rather than human self-exaltation. The sign of the miraculous budding almond rod is preserved for future generations so that God's people will submit to His authorized leaders and be fearful of incurring his discipline. Genuine leaders will nurture genuine faith and spiritual life as God brings the blessing in His mercy and grace.

Timothy Ashley: This **third account** in the series on the justification of the Aaronic priesthood narrates the story of the event that finally makes an impression on the people. It should not be separated from the other two stories in the series, because the final effect (**vv. 27–28 [Eng. 12–13]**) is a reaction not only to this miracle but also to the other dramatic interventions of God since **16:1**. . . The point of **16:1–35** was the superiority of the Aaronic priesthood over the other Levites. Although that point is alluded to in **17:18 (Eng. 3)**, the main point here is the necessity for a divinely appointed priesthood to intercede for the laity. This story, then, balances out the division between the Aaronic priests and other Levites created by **16:1–35**, by exalting the Levites (esp. the family of Aaron) above the lay tribes in the matter of service of God. This brings us back to the perspective of **chs. 1–4**.

Gordon Wenham: We are probably supposed to understand that some parts were in bud, others in bloom and others had fruited. Why it bore almonds is not stated, but it is probably significant. Almond blooms early with white blossom and its fruits were highly prized (**Gen. 43:11**). White in Scripture symbolizes purity, holiness and God himself (e.g. **Isa. 1:18; Dan. 7:9; Rev. 20:11**). Jeremiah associates the almond (*šāqad*) with watching (*šāqad*) (**Jer. 1:11–12**). All these qualities were personified by Aaron and the tribe of Levi. They were the holy tribe par excellence, who represented Israel before God and God to Israel, and they were responsible for watching over the people by instructing them in the statutes of the Lord (Lev. 10:11).

C.H.M.: Ministry is of God, as to its source, power, and responsibility.

I. (:1-7) CHOICE FOR LEADERSHIP MADE EVIDENT VIA DIVINE TEST

A. (:1-5) Explanation of the Divine Test

(:1) *“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,”*

Authoritative words from the Lord are communicated to the community through the mediator of Moses = God’s appointed leader

1. (:2a) Collect a Rod from Each Tribe

“Speak to the sons of Israel, and get from them a rod for each father's household: twelve rods, from all their leaders according to their fathers' households.”

Wiersbe: The fact that all the tribes were included in the test suggests that all of them had been represented in the insurrection.

2. (:2b-3) Identify Each Rod

a. (:2b) Write the Name on the Rod

“You shall write each name on his rod,”

b. (:3a) Write Aaron’s name on the Rod for the Levites

“and write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi;”

Timothy Ashley: This verse is meant to show that Aaron was God’s choice to be the leader of the Levites. This is an interesting choice since Aaron is a descendant of Levi’s second son, Kohath, and because Moses himself was also a Levite. Thus the leadership in view here is only the priesthood; it is not a challenge to Moses’ own role as leader.

The question that this verse (and **v. 21 [Eng. 6]**) raises is whether Aaron’s rod was one of the twelve or an additional, thirteenth rod. The text does not say in so many words, and some scholars have simply assumed that the whole number is twelve, and that the half-tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim are counted as one tribe of Joseph (as in **Deut. 27:12**). The consistent practice of Numbers, however, is to count twelve secular tribes in addition to Levi, and unless one wishes to suppose a standpoint at odds with the rest of the book, one should probably see Levi as a thirteenth tribe (and rod) here. In this case **v. 21b (Eng. 6b)** makes better sense when it reports that Aaron’s rod was *“in the midst of their [i.e., the other twelve tribes’] rods”* (*betôk maṭṭôtām*).

c. (:3b) Summary: One Rod Per Tribe (total of 13 rods)

“for there is one rod for the head of each of their fathers' households.”

3. (:4) Deposit the Rods in the Presence of the Lord

“You shall then deposit them in the tent of meeting in front of the testimony, where I meet with you.”

Ronald Allen: This means that the staffs were brought not only to the Tent of Meeting but within the Most Holy Place. I suspect the staffs would have been placed as near the ark as practical. The symbolism is that these staffs were right, as it were, in the “lap” of God. The very issue of bringing these staffs into the Most Holy Place must have been chilling. Moses, who brought these staffs near, must have realized that he was doing a most unusual act. The most immediate placement of the staffs in the presence of God is assured by these words.

4. (:5a) Proof of God’s Choice of Aaron

“And it will come about that the rod of the man whom I choose will sprout.”

Reference doctrine of sovereign election; God is making choices all of the time; here it involves choice of leadership

Ronald Allen: The story demands nothing short of a miracle, an intervention of the power of God in the normal order of things in such a way as to produce wonder and awe. This demonstration of the power of God and his sovereign work was to be wondrous, something for the people to remember throughout all their generations. This was the call for a major demonstration of the power of God. It was to be regarded as truly stunning. It was also to be regarded as absolutely and finally convincing, for the act of God would be impossible for anyone else to duplicate.

How does the Holy Spirit confirm the legitimacy of spiritual leaders today?

Are we properly applying the NT qualifications for church leadership?

How did the Apostle Paul respond to challenges against the validity of His apostleship?

5. (:5b) Purpose for God Validating Aaron’s Leadership

“Thus I shall lessen from upon Myself the grumbings of the sons of Israel, who are grumbling against you.”

B. (:6-7) Execution of the Divine Test

1. (:6) Collecting the Rods from Each Tribe

“Moses therefore spoke to the sons of Israel, and all their leaders gave him a rod apiece, for each leader according to their fathers’ households, twelve rods, with the rod of Aaron among their rods.”

2. (:7) Depositing the Rods Before the Lord

“So Moses deposited the rods before the LORD in the tent of the testimony.”

Quite the dramatic scene; must have been a tense evening for all involved as they waited for the morning to see the outcome

II. (:8-11) CONFIRMATION OF LEADERSHIP OF AARON PRODUCES MIRACULOUS SIGN THAT IS SAVED AS A TESTIMONY

A. (:8) Sign of Miraculous Growth on Aaron's Rod

1. Miraculous Timing

“Now it came about on the next day that Moses went into the tent of the testimony;”

2. Miraculous Growth

“and behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds.”

Peter Wallace: The basic image, as **David Stubbs** suggests, is that “the rod is a symbol of authority, and its budding and sprouting is a symbol of life. The rod thus symbolizes proper priestly authority and leadership that brings life. The besetting sin of many leaders is seeking or using authority and power for their own benefit and prestige. Instead, the role of leadership in the people of God is to bring life to the people, to guide them in the paths of life, and to use discipline and authority for the health and life of the community.” (p151)

J. Ligon Duncan: it was the first of the flowering plants after winter. And they even had a name for it: they called it *the watcher*, because it was the first of the plants to break its flowering after the cold days of winter. It was a beautiful flower, and it indicated God's watching over them even during the course of the cold winter. So the prophets would sometimes use it to talk about how God was watching over the children of Israel. Even in their bleak winter of disobedience, God was watching over Israel.

B. (:9) Sign of God's Choice of Aaron Contrasted with Usurpers

“Moses then brought out all the rods from the presence of the LORD to all the sons of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod.”

C. (:10-11) Sign of Testimony to Shut Up the Disputers

“But the LORD said to Moses, ‘Put back the rod of Aaron before the testimony to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put an end to their grumbings against Me, so that they should not die.’ Thus Moses did; just as the LORD had commanded him, so he did.”

III. (:12-13) CONVICTION OF INSUBORDINATION STIRS UP EXAGGERATED FEAR OF EXTERMINATION

A. (:12) Hysterical Cries of Self Pity

“Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying!’”

This is the “Woe is Me” mentality – the sky is falling; things could not be worse; there

is no possible remedy for our sinful condition

B. (:13a) Overreaction to God’s Discipline

“Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die.”

MacArthur: The people’s fear of going near to God led to a reaffirmation of the priesthood of Aaron and his sons in **chap. 18**.

C. (:13b) Despair of Life Itself

“Are we to perish completely?”

Timothy Ashley: The reality is, however, that, since the Israelites have been experiencing death by divine agency in the immediate context, their fear is that Yahweh will now not limit punishment to those who encroach on the tent of meeting, but will send it to anyone who simply comes near. This usage of the verb is further evidence that this verse is the desperate outcry of a terrified people. If God is going to kill anyone who comes near to the tent, then the sanest conclusion would be to separate oneself from the tent altogether. This outcry, leading as it could to the separation of Israel and Yahweh, gives rise to the new legislation that follows in ch. 18.

Wiersbe: As usual, the Israelites overreacted when they heard the new and concluded that anybody who came near the tabernacle would perish (**vv. 12-13**; see **14:40-45**). At least they had a fear of judgment, but they didn’t have a true fear of God in their hearts. But the presence of the tabernacle in the camp should have been a source of confidence for the Jews, for it meant that Jehovah was present with them. He would guide them through the wilderness, defeat their enemies, receive their sacrifices, and grant them forgiveness. To calm their fears, Moses in the next two chapters explained the ministry of the priests and the importance of the tabernacle of the camp.

C.H.M.: In the preceding chapter, we see bold presumption in the very presence of the majesty of Jehovah, where there should have been profound humility. Here, in the presence of divine grace and its provisions, we observe legal fear and distrust. Thus it is ever. Mere nature neither understands holiness nor grace. At one moment we hearken to such accents as these: *“All the congregation are holy;”* and the next moment, the word is, *“Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish.”* The carnal mind presumes where it ought to retire; it distrusts where it ought to confide.

However, all this becomes the occasion, through the goodness of God, of unfolding to us, in a very full and blessed manner, the holy responsibilities, as well as the precious privileges, of the priesthood. How gracious it is – how like our God, to turn His people’s mistakes into an occasion of furnishing deeper instruction as to His ways!

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How does God validate spiritual leaders today?
- 2) Do you have the sense that God will only put up with so much grumbling and complaining against His appointed leaders?
- 3) What is the significance of the Lord watching over His people in this context?
- 4) When have we overreacted to God's discipline in our life?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Raymond Brown: In the startling events at the Tent of Meeting, the people had just been given undeniable proof of the divine authenticity of the priesthood, but the Lord knew that not everyone would be convinced. He knew all about 'that disease of obstinacy' which still maintained 'its secret hold upon their hearts' So, to the existing 'sign' of the bronze altar-covering (**16:36–38**), he added another. Some who could be overwhelmed by an expression of instant wrath might be persuaded by a manifestation of continuing mercy. Therefore, the Lord added to the daunting testimony of death (the bronze altar-covering), a persuasive testimony of life. A further sign, a **fruit-bearing staff**, was to be kept as a sign to the rebellious (**10**).

This memorable sign that the Aaronic priesthood was God's revealed will for his people was important for several reasons.

A necessary sign

Its purpose was to establish beyond doubt the legitimate authority of the Aaronic line, a matter of particular significance in view of Aaron's increasing age (**20:22–29**). The priest had two remaining sons, and these men and their male children would one day take up his responsibilities. There had already been fierce objections to Aaron's distinctive ministry (**16:8–11**) and, unless the matter was convincingly settled, the death of Aaron might become an occasion for renewed contention and division. God told Aaron that by the miraculous transformation of his rod during its overnight stay in the tabernacle, he would rid himself of this constant grumbling against Aaron by the Israelites (**5**).

The Lord knew that the murmuring was not simply about Aaron but against him: '*This will put an end to their grumbling against me*' (**10**). It is a poignant feature of this and similar narratives in Numbers that grumbling about the leaders is complaining against God. When they are going through hard times in leadership crises, their pains are his own.

God's love is such that he cannot possibly be detached from his people's troubles. That

was evident way back in the days of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. He told Moses at the burning bush that he had '*seen*' and '*heard*' and was '*concerned*' about their sufferings, the same word as in the Servant Song in Isaiah that says that he '*carried our sorrows*'. He not only knows about our griefs but bears them, feeling them intensely in his own divine nature. Even when his people had deserved their sufferings because of their offensive idolatry, he came to help them because '*he could bear Israel's misery no longer*'. The glorified Christ, grieved about the intense sufferings of the early Christians, asked their ruthless persecutor, '*Why do you persecute me?*' When Saul assaulted the believers he was wounding their Lord.

An educative sign

The story demonstrated how God's people were to discern God's will. The leaders of the ancestral tribes were to write their names on the individual staffs (2) and Aaron's name was to be put on the staff of Levi's tribe (3). They were to be placed overnight in front of the ark, which symbolized God's throne, and, significantly at this time, the Lord identified the sanctuary as the place where he met with his people. Two things were clearly important; in matters of dispute they were to seek the Lord's presence ('*where I meet with you*', 4) and submit to the Lord's authority ('*Place them ... in front of the Testimony*', 4). It is a call to enter the place of prayer in order to discern God's will, not to gain support for our own ideas. The sanctuary was the place where the priests met with God and kept his word, lovingly preserved in the ark's tablets.⁶

A continuing sign

Aaron's priestly ministry had recently been authenticated by his daring and compassionate intercession. '*He stood between the living and the dead*' (16:48), yet the memory of such a sensational event might be short-lived. People soon forget. A sign was needed to provide God's people with incontrovertible, visible evidence of the Lord's mind on this crucial issue, and it was given in the form of a once-dead staff that overnight miraculously burst into life.

The Lord gave orders to Moses that this staff was to be preserved in front of the Testimony, to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. Characteristically, Moses did just as the LORD commanded him (11). The rod was made a permanent part of the tabernacle furnishings, preserved with the ark's other visible signs of the Lord's unique authority ('*the stone tablets of the covenant*'), and unfailing providence ('*the gold jar of manna*').⁷ The blossoming and fruit-bearing staff was a striking tangible reminder of God's incomparable power that caused a lifeless walking-stick to sprout, bud, burst forth into beautiful white blossoms and produce almonds, all in a single night. What normally demanded months had been accomplished in hours. Only the Lord could do that, and such a God was to be revered and honoured, not ignored or disobeyed as the rebels had done.

A graphic sign

The fruitful staff was a living branch of an almond tree, and its precise description must be significant. The Hebrew people called the almond tree 'the watcher' or 'the awake one', the first to be roused to life after the sleep of winter. Its attractive blossom figured

on the lampstand bowls in the tabernacle (8:4). Jeremiah saw *'the branch of an almond tree'* (*šāqēd*), for the Lord was watching (*šōqēd*) over his word to perform it, even through the bleak winter of Judah's apostasy.

This supernatural event of the fruitful staff spoke eloquently about the uniqueness, faithfulness, holiness and fruitfulness of the divinely appointed order of priests. Their unique authority had been confirmed by this miraculous staff, which sprouted *'through the power which was placed in it by God'*.¹⁰ Their close connection with God's word was captured in the name of the tree; the priests were *'watching over the people by instructing them'* in God's word.¹¹ The necessary moral purity of the office was portrayed in its attractive white flowers, and their spiritual fruitfulness in the greatly valued **12** almonds.

The sign was intended to put an end to their constant grumbling against his servants (5) and against God himself (10). The Lord knew that, though it might convince the miracle's immediate witnesses, it would hardly silence the complaining multitude as a whole. Sadly, Numbers returns to the murmuring theme again (20:2–5; 21:4–5). God was patient with them, and his compassion is revealed in another feature of this story. At the time of the people's obstinate refusal to enter the land, Moses had recalled that the Lord *'punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation'* (14:18), and the children of the rebels proved its truth by having to wait before they could enter Canaan. Yet Korah's rebellion demonstrated not only God's judgment but also his mercy. His children did not all die as their father did (16:27, 32). Some of them may have responded to the warning to move away from the offenders' tents, even though it meant leaving their parents (16:25–27). Later generations did not suffer, for his line *'did not die out'* (26:11); distant members of that family lived to inspire others, through majestic psalms, to put their hope and trust in God, and not to doubt or rebel against him as their truculent ancestor had done.

God had demonstrated his will by this almond-rod sign, but the people were still terrified by what had happened. Sudden fire had consumed the opponents (16:35), and God's judgment had sent a huge number of rebellious people to their graves (16:49). The remaining multitude were panic-stricken that they too might suddenly meet their end. The Tent of Meeting, which for over a year had symbolized their security, now seemed to threaten their peace. The distraught Israelites cried to Moses for help: *'We shall die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?'* (12).

The Lord who provided an authentic sign to silence their complaints spoke a comforting word to banish their fears. Word and sign belong together. Signs alone are unlikely to remove the doubts of unbelieving people. The New Testament testifies to the inadequacy of signs as 'solvents of scepticism'. Jesus made that abundantly clear to his contemporaries and Paul was similarly unconvinced by their power to clinch an argument. So the God who had revealed his will to Moses now spoke through Aaron (18:1), the priest authenticated by the miraculous sign. Although normally he addressed the people through Moses, he used Aaron as his spokesman as further evidence that the

priest was the Lord's appointed servant.

Iain Duguid: How, though, was this simple sign in **Numbers 17** supposed to put an end to their grumbling? To answer that question, we need to look at the sign more closely. It is not simply a sign that God had chosen Aaron and the Levites to serve him—it was a sign of his purpose in calling Aaron and the Levites to serve him. If God had wanted simply to indicate that Aaron's staff was the chosen one, he could have had it emerge and stand upright while the other staffs bowed down to it. What actually happened was that the apparently dead staff showed incredible signs of fruitfulness—sprouting, budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit overnight. Moreover, the fruit that this little tree produced was not just any fruit but specifically almonds.

Where else in Scripture do you find a miniature tree with almond flowers and buds? That is exactly what the lampstand in the tabernacle was (**Exodus 25:31–40**). It was a stylized tree with symbols of fruitfulness on it. This tree with buds, blossoms, and flowers all at the same time was a static picture of the whole cycle of life under God's blessing, nothing less than an image of the tree of life. The symbolic function of the lampstand was to shine God's favor forward onto the Table with the twelve loaves of showbread which symbolized God's favor and blessing resting on all twelve of the tribes of Israel.

The lampstand was not just any fruitful tree—it was specifically an almond tree. The Hebrew word for almond (*šāqēd*) is related to the verb “to watch” (*šāqad*), for the almond tree blossoms early and was thus a marker of the onset of spring. Thus in **Jeremiah 1:11** the Lord used an almond branch as a visible symbol of the Lord's watching over his word (in this case of judgment) and bringing it to imminent fulfillment. So too the lampstand as an almond tree was a marker of the certain fulfillment of a greater blessing that was yet to come. The Lord was watching over his people for blessing, both now and in greater measure in the future.

The Budding of Aaron's Staff

With that as background, we can return to the budding of Aaron's staff. The Lord took Aaron's dead stick and turned it into a miniature lampstand in the midst of the other twelve sticks, a sign of life and future blessing in the midst of the community. This blooming almond branch was a symbol of the certainty that the Lord would fulfill his promise of great blessing for his people through the gift of the priesthood. That is why the sign should have put an end to the grumbling of the rebellious (**17:10**). It should have reminded them that the Aaronic priesthood was God's chosen channel of blessing and life for the community in the present and a sign of an even greater blessing to come. Ironically, the Israelites responded to this demonstration of beauty and life with the fear of death. They said to Moses, “*Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish?*” (17:12, 13).

In one sense they got the message. Their cry was a repudiation of their earlier assertion that all are holy and can safely approach the presence of God. Now they rightly feared

approaching God. Yet they failed to see that this holy God whom they could not approach had graciously established a means in the Aaronic priesthood through which sinners could safely approach God and not die (**17:10**). God's purpose for his people was resolutely good: his goal for their lives was not death but life. They needed to wake up and smell the sweet scent of almond blossoms: in spite of their rebellion, the Lord was watching over them for blessing.

There is a profound lesson for you and me in the blossoming of Aaron's staff. In the first place, like the Israelites we need to see that by ourselves we are unfit to stand in the presence of a holy God. We are nothing more than dead sticks, fit only for the fire. Without God's promise of grace we too would be forced to cry out, "We will die! We are lost, we are all lost! Anyone who even comes near the presence of the Lord will die." We are not by nature holy or naturally part of the Lord's people. We are dead in our transgressions and sins (**Ephesians 2:1**), without hope and without God in the world (**Ephesians 2:12**). Yet the Lord is able to take dead sticks and bring them to life and make them fruitful under his blessing.

How did he do that? Ultimately it was not through Aaron and his line. Aaron was a great blessing to his people, an intercessor whose incense offering halted God's judgment in its tracks and made a separation between the living and the dead. Yet Aaron himself was a sinner, ultimately unable to enter the Promised Land. His offspring faithfully served as priests, offering sacrifices on behalf of the people and teaching them God's Law. Yet all of their ministry was provisional, temporary, until the coming of God's new covenant in Jesus Christ. Aaron's blossoming staff pointed beyond himself and his offspring to the Messiah to come. Jesus is the great High Priest who, through his personal holiness and ultimate sacrifice on the cross, enabled the blessing of God's favor to be poured out on all of his chosen ones.

David Thompson: So as we come to **Numbers 17**, God wants to show the people of God that Aaron is still His chosen priest. Aaron still has God's stamp of approval. Others thought they were just as good as Aaron, but God said, "no you aren't." What God does is He decides to do something very unusual to show that Aaron is His special man.

GOD FULLY AUTHENTICATED THAT THE PRIESTHOOD BELONGED TO AARON AND HIS SONS BY A SIGN THAT WAS DESIGNED TO SILENCE THE REST OF THE CONGREGATION AND STOP THEIR MURMURING FOREVER.

In **chapter 16**, God destroyed the **grumblers** but in **chapter 17**, God is going to give a sign that is designed to destroy the **grumbling**. Murmuring and grumbling against leadership is a very serious and very dangerous matter in the mind of God. This would be a sign to the arrogant rebels that would remind the people of God of this truth. God had chosen Aaron and the Levites to serve Him as priest. What that means is that He did not call others to this responsibility.

Now grumbling against leadership is a very serious issue. If our chief end is to glorify God, then when we grumble against God's choices, we are actually assaulting the glory of God who made the choices. A believer who is grumbling cannot possibly glorify God nor enjoy their relationship with God.

In this chapter, God makes it clear that His choice is His choice, and if His people persist in grumbling against His choice, there will be serious, negative consequences.

Now this chapter breaks down nicely into three simple parts:

PART #1 – God instructs Moses to get twelve staffs; one from each tribal leader. 17:1-5

In the aftermath of God dropping people dead in **chapter 16**, He wants to reinforce His selection of Aaron and put a stop to grumbling, so **verse 1** says, “*the LORD spoke to Moses.*” This is important. It is not Moses coming up with this, this is directly from God. . .

Now a rod is a piece of dead wood. It is cut off from some tree. But God says I will perform a miracle and will cause the staff of the man of my choosing to sprout and produce life. Now the miracle will be twofold. First, something dead will produce life. Second, the time to produce the life will be shortened. God will cause a dead piece of wood to blossom in one night. . .

PART #2 – Moses took each staff and put it inside the tent of meeting. 17:6-9

Moses completely obeyed God. Moses had all the leaders bring him their staffs including the one from Aaron, and according to **verse 7**, Moses put the staffs before the LORD in the tent of meeting before the ark in the most holy place.

According to **verse 8**, the next day when Moses went into the tent of the testimony, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds and produced blossoms and bore ripe almonds. This was a stick the night before that was dead, and now it was alive by the power of God and producing fruit.

Now it is possible from the text that when you looked at Aaron's rod, it displayed all stages of growth. In other words, it is possible that when you looked at the rod, on one portion of it were buds, on another portion were blossoms, and on another portion were almonds. This would be an impressive thing to see.

This is exactly what God does with those He saves. They were dead in their sins and He saves them and then miraculously uses them to bear fruit. For those who watch the life, they see the growth process in the life touched by God. First, there is a budding, then a blossoming, and then a fruit producing. . .

PART #3 – God instructs Moses to put Aaron's staff back as a testimony of God's

choice of Aaron. 17:10-13

According to **verse 10**, God told Moses to put back Aaron's rod before the testimony as a sign to the rebels. In other words, this rod was to remain where Moses found it. God did not want anyone to ever forget that Aaron was His sacred choice. Aaron was God's only choice in this. The location in front of the ark was a powerful sign of the importance of this leader. This did not mean that others did not have responsibilities; it just meant that Aaron was His choice of priest. . .

Now there were three visible reminders that God gave to Israel that they should stop rebelling against God and continually obey God's Word:

- 1) He gave them the tassels on their garments for each person to see (**15:38-39**);
- 2) He gave them the hammered out bronze plates that they saw at the altar (**16:38-39**);
- 3) He gave them Aaron's budded staff (**17:10**).

Now what are the tangible reminders we have that we need to stop rebelling and obey God?

- 1) God has given us copies of His written Word;
- 2) God has given us His indwelling Holy Spirit;
- 3) God has given us the Lord's Supper.

J. Ligon Duncan: Aaron's Rod Blossoming

God appoints a miracle to visibly, and tangibly and publicly, certify that He has chosen Moses and Aaron; and, He's chosen the priests to serve Him in the temple, to give leadership to the people, to intercede and to atone for the people; and, that this is not something open to anyone just to appoint themselves. And in the course of this passage the Lord teaches us much about the way that one can approach the living God for fellowship with Him. . .

I. In verses 1-11, we learn that all true ministry comes from God. . .

The people have questioned whether Moses is God's man, or whether he's just appointed himself and is totally out of control, and has usurped all the appropriate authority. And yet when a message has to be delivered to Israel, who does God speak to? Moses. And then He tells Moses to speak to the people of God. So if they're going to get a word from God, they're only getting it through Moses. So God again, in that third way, shows who is His hand-picked, hand selected, divinely chosen and appointed leader: Moses. He speaks to Moses again (even though the people of God have been questioning whether Moses is the rightful leader), and then He has Moses speak to the people. . .

II. (:12-13) Now here's my second point. It's very short, but it's very important, and that is simply this: **This passage reminds us why the ministry must come from God...** why God must appoint the way into His presence. And the answer is very simple: Because only He can save. . .

They're right. If they approach the tabernacle on their own, they're going to die. They're going to end up like the guys that were carrying the censers, like the 14,700 that were consumed by the plague. But God has appointed priests to go there for them and bear their sin. . .

That's the great message of this passage. God appoints the way that we come into fellowship with Him. Why? Because we can't redeem ourselves. We can't enter back into His presence. Only He can provide the way in Jesus Christ.

Gordon Keddie: But of what was Aaron's staff a sign?

First, it testified to **God's sovereignty**. It was placed before "the Testimony" or Ark of the Covenant, which was itself the evidence of God's will for his people and of the holiness of his ordinances. . . The general message, however, was that God's revealed will must stand. The staff symbolized authority: Aaron's authority as priest and the ultimate authority from which it was derived, that of God himself. . .

Second, Aaron's staff speaks of God's **covenant mercy**. It was "kept" in the ark as a constant witness to the Lord's determination to save his people from their sins – "*so that they will not die,*" even if they had been rebels before!

Closely related to this, in the third place, is God's promise to maintain an **ordained ministry** among his people. . . God has covenanted to provide his church throughout history with a ministry called, gifted and ordained according to his will. . .

Fourth, the staff reminded the people of God's **unchangeable justice**. It was "*a token against the rebels*". God keeps mercy for thousands, but will not clear the guilty (**Exodus 34:7**). It calls for the confession that the Lord is always "*proved right when you speak, and justified when you judge*" (**Psalms 51:4**).

Fifth, we have an intimation of **God's purpose to send his Son**. There is a breeze of gospel grace here. . .

Finally, there is a promise of **God's future blessing of his people**.

TEXT: Numbers 18:1-32

TITLE: *DISTINCTIVE ROLE AND SUPPORT OF THE PRIESTS AND LEVITES*

BIG IDEA:

SPIRITUAL LEADERS BEAR HEAVY RESPONSIBILITIES BUT FIND THE LORD TO BE THEIR PORTION (OVER AND ABOVE GENEROUS COMPENSATION FOR THEIR SERVICE)

INTRODUCTION:

Having validated the special role of the Aaronic priesthood and punished the usurpers who were not content with their divinely appointed ministry roles, the Lord now spells out the distinctive role and support for the priests and Levites. It seems strange to begin this discussion with a warning about the liability and heavy responsibility that falls on the shoulders of spiritual leaders. Yet that somber tone is balanced with an emphasis on both the privilege of service and the expectation for financial and material support in full-time ministry. At the heart of the passage is the promise that in the absence of any claim to material inheritance, spiritual leaders can rest in the Lord as their portion. The text concludes with a reminder that even full-time ministers are not exempt from their obligation to render their appropriate offerings to the Lord.

Raymond Brown: The sudden transition from lengthy narrative (16:1–17:12) to priestly regulations is closely related to what has just gone before. The main point at issue in the disruptive conduct of Korah and his colleagues was the distinction between priests and the Levites. So, following the visible sign, this passage consists of God’s authenticating word, repeating the distinction between priests and Levites so that there could be no possible misunderstanding concerning their respective and well-defined roles.

Dennis Cole: Following the vindication of the Aaronic priesthood, the role of the Aaronic priests and the Levites as guardians of the Holy Place takes on additional significance. The holiness and purity of the sanctuary may be at risk should a people become rebellious and attempt to usurp the power of the divinely ordained priesthood or endeavor to present impure or unclean sacrifices in the realm of the holy.

I. (:1-7) DISTINCTION BETWEEN ROLE OF PRIESTS AND LEVITES

“So the LORD said to Aaron,”

Wiersbe: the people of Israel were terrified even to have the tabernacle in their camp. “*Are we going to die?*” they cried (17:13, NIV). Actually, God’s presence in their camp was the distinctive mark of the people of Israel (Ex. 33:1-16), for Israel was the only

nation to have the glory of the Living God present with them and going before them (**Rom. 9:4**).

God spoke expressly to Aaron (**Num. 18: 1, 8, 20**) and thereby elevated his high priestly ministry even more. The Lord made it clear that it was the responsibility of the priests to minister to the tabernacle and protect it from defilement, and it was the responsibility of the Levites to assist the priests in their tabernacle ministry. As long as the priests and Levites obeyed this rule, there would be no judgment sent to the people (**v. 5**).

A. (:1) Summary of the Liability Vested in the Levites and Aaronic Priests

1. Levites (Kohathites) Liable for Sanctuary Violations

“You and your sons and your father's household with you shall bear the guilt in connection with the sanctuary;”

“*your father's household*” -- Dispute whether reference is to entire Levitical clan or only the Kohathite branch.

Brueggemann: The English translations apply it to the **sacred space**, in which case “*house of your fathers*” means the entire Levitical tribe with their general Tabernacle responsibilities; however, some commentators think “*sacred objects*” is meant here (**Ashley** 1993:338; **Milgrom** 1989:146), in which case “house of your fathers” refers only to the Kohathites, who carried the **sacred objects**.

2. Aaronic Priests Liable for Priesthood Violations

“and you and your sons with you shall bear the guilt in connection with your priesthood.”

Timothy Ashley: The charge comes, first, to Aaron and his sons, i.e., the Aaronic priesthood. To this group is added your father's house (*bêṭ- 'ābikā*). Most scholars see this expression as a reference to the whole tribe of Levi. But the pl. *bêṭ 'ābôt* usually means a subdivision smaller than the clan (*mišpāhā*). Occasionally the expression is a synonym for the full tribe (**Num. 17:17–18, 21 [Eng. 2–3, 6]**). In the sing., as here, it means “tribe” only in **17:17 (Eng. 2)**, because of the play on the word *maṭṭeh*, “rod, tribe,” in that passage. In the discussion of the census of the Levitical families in **3:14–37**, the sing. designates the three Levitical groups: the Gershonites (**3:24**), the Kohathites (**3:30**), and the Merarites (**3:35**). It seems a sound conclusion that, except where the context demands otherwise for clarity, the term in either the sing. or the pl. indicates a tribal subunit. Thus your father's house here should probably be identified as Aaron's family group, the Kohathites. This identification gains weight when it is realized that **v. 2** brings the whole tribe of Levi into the picture prefixed with the words and also (*weḡam*). In **4:1–20** it is the Kohathites who cooperate with the priests in the preparation and carrying of the holiest things. This identification also agrees with the task assigned here for the holy objects, which, as in **10:21**, is the proper translation of *hammiqdāš*.

To bear the guilt (*nāsā* 'āwōn) means to bear the divine punishment growing out of that guilt. The particular subject matter at hand is encroachment on the sanctuary and the wrath it causes to break out (17:27–28 [Eng. 12–13]). Thus v. 1a states that the priests and the Kohathites are to bear guilt for future Israelite trespass against the holy objects. But only the Aaronic priests will bear the guilt for future encroachment on the priesthood (v. 1b).

B. (:2-6) Details of the Distinctive Role of the Levites vs. the Aaronic Priests

1. (:2-4) Duties of the Levites

a. (:2) Fellowship in Ministry

“But bring with you also your brothers, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you, while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.”

b. (:3) Obligations and Restrictions

“And they shall thus attend to your obligation and the obligation of all the tent, but they shall not come near to the furnishings of the sanctuary and the altar, lest both they and you die.”

Timothy Ashley: The penalty for failure to stop encroachment on the sacred vessels and the altar is death at the hand of God. The Qal of the verb *mūt* (“to die”) is used of death by divine agency. This penalty might seem strange since the punishment for offenses that have a disastrous effect on society is usually death by human agency. But once a person breaks through the protective guard of Levites and priests, no one could stop the offense without endangering himself and the community in the process; hence only God could carry out the death sentence. The ones upon whom this death comes are they (the antecedent for which must be “*the Levites*”—all of them) and you (the antecedent for which is not just Aaron, since it is pl., but all the priests). Encroachment by a single Levite, then, would bring the death of the whole group of priests and Levites. This principle is harsh, but prior to this time such encroachment (without intercession) would bring the death of the whole community (e.g., the plague in 17:6–15 [Eng. 16:41–50]).

c. (:4) Privileges and Exclusions

“And they shall be joined with you and attend to the obligations of the tent of meeting, for all the service of the tent; but an outsider may not come near you.”

“outsider” = non-Levite

Gordon Wenham: It is the Levites’ duty to guard the tent of meeting (3–4), so that no unauthorized person may draw near and provoke God’s wrath on the nation. But the Levites in their turn are precluded from undertaking specifically priestly jobs, such as entering the tent of meeting or officiating at the altar. It is the priests’ task to guard against such trespass by the Levites, which would again provoke judgment (5, 7). Trespassers caught by the priests must be executed (7).

2. (:5-6) Contrast Between the Role of the Aaronic Priests and the Levites

a. (:5) Superior Role of the Priests

“So you shall attend to the obligations of the sanctuary and the obligations of the altar, that there may no longer be wrath on the sons of Israel.”

b. (:6) Supportive/Subordinate Role of the Levites

“And behold, I Myself have taken your fellow Levites from among the sons of Israel; they are a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD, to perform the service for the tent of meeting.”

Raymond Brown: It was the Levites’ **subservient** and **supportive** role, to assist Aaron and his sons (2), that Korah and his friends found objectionable; yet the willingness to submit to others is an essential component of spiritual leadership. It minimizes the possibility of domineering dictatorship.

Theirs was an **accountable role**: They are to be responsible to the priests (3) for their work in connection with the Tent of the Testimony (2). They were meant to be not adventurous initiators but compliant servants of the will of God. Submissiveness in service can be realized only if we take Jesus as our primary role model. As the surrendered Son he was totally submissive in his obedience to the Father, and as the exemplary Servant he was voluntarily submissive in love for his disciples.

It was also a **restricted role**. The restraint operated on two levels. It was restricted in that they must not assume the priests’ responsibilities; they must not go near the furnishings of the sanctuary or the altar. If they inadvertently undertook a task intended exclusively for the priesthood, both they and the priest would die (3). It was restricted too in the sense that neither could non-Levites undertake the Levites’ duties. Their work was to protect the Tent from careless or indifferent intruders.

It was, furthermore, a **privileged role**, for they were the Lord’s choice gift to the priests: *‘I have selected your fellow Levites from among the Israelites as a gift to you, dedicated to the LORD to do the work at the Tent of Meeting’* (6). The Lord knew that the priests would need reliable helpers able to undertake some of the exacting physical jobs, particularly when the Tent of Meeting had to be moved on from one place to another. It demanded people strong enough to dismantle the Tent and its portable courtyard, and to arrange for its careful transportation and erection at the next site.

Ministry in any form is a **subservient activity**. It is not an opportunity for arrogant self-display. The servant is God’s gift to his people, a strong shoulder to lean on, not a rod for their backs. Paul took this idea, of the church’s servants as God’s loving gift, as the concept of ministry he outlined to the first-century churches. Grace *‘has been given’* to us all in the wide range of variously gifted and uniquely equipped servants with whom he enriches the life of his people.

C. (:7) Summary of the Priority Role of the Aaronic Priests

1. Perform Your Priestly Responsibilities

“But you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything concerning the altar and inside the veil, and you are to perform service.”

2. Appreciate the Privilege of Priestly Service

“I am giving you the priesthood as a bestowed service,”

MacArthur: Even though the priesthood demanded much, the priests were to view it as a gift from the Lord.

Ronald Allen: The frightful obligations of the priests and the Levites and their responsibilities were balanced in the sense of the importance and honor of the work they did in the presence of God (v. 5). The divine vantage point is that they should regard their service of the priesthood as a gift – a gift that is priceless (v. 6). The gift was to the priests; they of all men were able to approach the Holy Place and minister before the Lord (v. 7). The Lord’s gift of the priesthood was also to the people; that there was a legitimate priesthood was an act of God’s mercy. The priests have a dual identity. On their shoulders rests the protection of the nation before God. The weight of that responsibility must be enormous. But the priests were also the most privileged persons in the community, for they could draw near to God.

3. Guard Against Any Non-Aaronic Usurpers

“but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.”

Raymond Brown: The priests were also reminded of their exclusive obligations. Aaron knew only too well that, earlier, two of his sons had grieved God by offering ‘*unauthorised fire ... contrary to his command*’. Moreover, at a later stage in their history, other priests were to fail him by their inconsistent lifestyle or their rejection of his word, so these repeated regulations were necessary. Like the supportive order of Levites, the priesthood also was a gift. They had a clearly defined responsibility in defending the Tent from willful, irreverent rebels who, like Korah, Dathan and Abiram, might be indifferent to God’s Word. King Uzziah of Judah arrogantly grasped a censer as Korah had done before him, and he too came under the stern hand of God’s judgment.

II. (:8-19) SUPPORT OF THE AARONIC PRIESTS VIA VARIOUS OFFERINGS

“Then the LORD spoke to Aaron,”

A. (:8) Summary Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests

“Now behold, I Myself have given you charge of My offerings, even all the holy gifts of the sons of Israel, I have given them to you as a portion, and to your sons as a perpetual allotment.”

Timothy Ashley: Based on the fact that the priests (as well as the Levites) have been given new and dangerous responsibilities to forbid encroachment and to be responsible for it on pain of death in vv. 1–7, God grants the priests special dues in order to compensate them in vv. 8–20. At the end of the unit (v. 20) a further theological rationale is added for these priestly contributions; the priests have no territorial inheritance in the land of Canaan. God himself (and the gifts that normally accrue to him) are their inheritance. These gifts to the priests are broken down into the categories of “*most holy*,” which may only be eaten by the priests themselves within the sacred precincts (vv. 9–10), and “*holy*,” which may be eaten by any ceremonially clean member of the priests’ families in any ceremonially clean place (i.e., outside the sanctuary, vv. 11–19). The main point of the unit is the assignment of these dues, not a statement on the performance of offerings

Dennis Cole: The passage commences with a formal introduction, utilizing the formula for divine revelatory instruction, *wayēdabbēr YHWH ’el-* (“*then Yahweh instructed ...*”), here used in one of the rare occurrences where Moses is not included as one of the recipients of the instruction. Then in a general statement the responsibility and perquisite compensation for the priesthood is described. In a simple chiasmic structure utilizing two common usages of the verb *nātan* (“to give”), emphasis is placed on the personal decision of the Lord to bless the Aaronic lineage with the keeping of his tribute, those contributions made to him by the Israelites. The first use of *nātan* carries the meaning of appointment or putting someone in charge of a specific responsibility. God had placed under the charge of the Aaronic priesthood all the holy things of the Israelites (*kol-qādēšē bēnē-yiśrā’ēl*), that is, all of their sacred offerings. In the second use of *nātan* emphasis is placed on the giving of the tribute for compensatory provision for the priests, supplying their sustenance.

The phrase used to describe the general responsibility of the priests in regard to these gifts is *mišmeret tērūmōtāw*, generally translated “*service of my presentation offerings*.” The question arises as to the nature of this service. Is it one of guardianship, preservation, oversight, or simply keeping? A variety of the derived meanings of the verbal form *šāmar* may apply at the various points in the process. In a general overview an individual or community group presented the tribute to the priests in the sanctuary, during which it came under their supervision. They performed or supplied oversight to certain required ritual acts with various portions of the given offering: assuring and guarding the sanctity of the offerer, offering, and sacred precinct, and then they were allowed to keep designated portions of many of the offerings as compensation for their services. Hence a broad range in usage may be in view.

B. (:9-18) Details Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests

1. (:9-10) Portions of the Regular Sacrifices

“This shall be yours from the most holy gifts, reserved from the fire; every offering of theirs, even every grain offering and every sin offering and every guilt offering, which they shall render to Me, shall be most

holy for you and for your sons. As the most holy gifts you shall eat it; every male shall eat it. It shall be holy to you.”

Ronald Allen: Something was regarded as **holy**, not because of some mysterious inner quality, but because it has been presented to the Lord for his use.

2. (:11-13) Portions of the Wave Offerings and First Fruit Offerings

“This also is yours, the offering of their gift, even all the wave offerings of the sons of Israel; I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual allotment. Everyone of your household who is clean may eat it. All the best of the fresh oil and all the best of the fresh wine and of the grain, the first fruits of those which they give to the LORD, I give them to you. The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the LORD, shall be yours; everyone of your household who is clean may eat it.”

Ronald Allen: The concept that God gets “the best of the first” is a constant in the worship texts of the Bible. The oil and the wine mentioned in this verse are not the dregs but the finest of the firstfruits. In giving the first and best to the Lord, believers are affirming with confidence that there will be something left for their own needs.

3. (:14) Devoted Things

“Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.”

4. (:15-18) Firstborn Offerings

a. (:15a) General Instruction

“Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours;

b. (:15b-16) Redemption Instructions

1) Redemption Scope: Applies to Man and Unclean Animals

“nevertheless the first-born of man you shall surely redeem, and the first-born of unclean animals you shall redeem.”

2) Redemption Price

“And as to their redemption price, from a month old you shall redeem them, by your valuation, five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs.”

Ronald Allen: Seemingly, the reason for paying a redemption price for the firstborn of man and unclean animals and the sacrifice of the firstborn of clean animals was to provide a perpetual reminder that conception, birth, and life are gifts of God.

c. (:17-18) Redemption Exclusions

“But the first-born of an ox or the first-born of a sheep or the first-born of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall offer up their fat in smoke as an offering by fire, for a soothing aroma to the LORD. And their meat shall be yours; it shall be yours like the breast of a wave offering and like the right thigh.”

Raymond Brown: The primary intention was not to provide meals for the priesthood but to please the Lord. Once again we meet the phrase we have come across earlier, about gifts offered as an aroma pleasing to the LORD (17). With the exception of the burnt offering, the greater part of those sacrificial animals and all the cereal offerings were to meet the physical needs of the priests and their families. The Lord wanted his people to know that he derived immense pleasure from the assurance that his servants were provided with life’s necessities. The primary purpose of Christian giving is not to support the workers but to glorify the Lord.

C. (:19) Summary Regarding Offerings for the Support of the Priests

“All the offerings of the holy gifts, which the sons of Israel offer to the LORD, I have given to you and your sons and your daughters with you, as a perpetual allotment. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD to you and your descendants with you.”

III. (:20) UNIQUE PORTION FOR THE PRIESTHOOD = Heart of the passage

“Then the LORD said to Aaron,”

A. Stated Negatively – Not Tied to Land Ownership

“You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor own any portion among them;”

B. Stated Positively – Tied to Special Relationship with the Lord

“I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel.”

Psalm 16:5-6

Timothy Ashley: This verse provides a further theological rationale for the fact that the priests receive these dues. As already suggested, their added guard duty in vv. 1–7 is one reason for the change in these contributions. The one put forth here is that the priests (represented by Aaron) have no land inheritance in Canaan; their inheritance is Yahweh himself. Just as the other Hebrews will be supported from their share (*hēleq*), so the priests will be supported by theirs, i.e., Yahweh. Although one must be careful not to limit this rationale to the dues, one may suppose that they were the tangible sign that the priests had Yahweh for their share. In this way the priests would be made to depend on God rather than on the land.

IV. (:21-24) SUPPORT OF THE LEVITES VIA TITHES

“And to the sons of Levi,”

A. (:21) Purpose of the Tithe = to Support the Levites for Their Service

“behold, I have given all the tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service which they perform, the service of the tent of meeting.”

Gordon Wenham: The tithe is a payment in return for their service in the tent of meeting (21, 31), i.e. their work of dismantling, carrying and erecting the tabernacle. It is a recognition of the dangers inherent in their occupation: by dealing with such holy things they may be subject to divine judgment, and they protect the people from that risk (22–23). Finally, the tithe compensates the Levites for their lack of inheritance in the land: whereas the other tribes had large tracts of land assigned to them to settle in, the Levites were given only forty-eight villages, scattered throughout the land (24; 34:16–35:8; Josh. 13–21).

Wiersbe: The Jews were obligated to pay three different tithes: a tithe to the Levites (vv. 21–24), a tithe “*eaten before the Lord*” (Deut. 14:22–27), and a tithe every three years that was given to the poor (Lev. 27:28–29).

B. (:22-23a) Privilege and Liability of Service Belongs Exclusively to the Levites

1. (:22) Warning Against Usurpers

“And the sons of Israel shall not come near the tent of meeting again, lest they bear sin and die.”

2. (:23a) Focus on the Levites – Privilege and Liability Belong to Them

“Only the Levites shall perform the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity;”

Dennis Cole: Note chiasmic structure:

H No Inheritance of Land (v. 20b)

I Tithe Inheritance for the Levites (v. 21)

D''' Levite Service (vv. 22–23)

I' Tithe Inheritance for the Levites (v. 24a)

H' No Inheritance of Land (v. 24b)

At the focal point of this section is the reiteration of the critical and dangerous role the Levites served on behalf of the Israelite community. During the wilderness journey the three clans of the Levites and the Aaronic priests would camp in the immediate vicinity of the four sides of the sanctuary, between it and the three other tribes that were encamped on the perimeter. They acted first as a positional barrier between the holy geo-central position of the Tent of Meeting and the community at large, ensuring its sanctity by guarding against encroachment by unauthorized persons, including any unclean persons of their own Levite clans. As stated previously in vv. 2–5, they would bear the consequences of sin and iniquity against the sanctuary, so that no longer—as had happened as a result of the recent Korah rebellion—would anyone die because of

such a violation of the holy precinct of the Tent of Meeting. This responsibility was to be a perpetual one, such that they were to be solely dedicated to the Lord and not encumbered by the territorial responsibilities of their Israelite brothers. This was their inheritance, as Yahweh's inheritance, in the present and in days to come, when Yahweh would bring Israel into the land of their inheritance.

C. (:23b-24) Perpetual Practice

“it shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations,”

1. (:23b) No Land Inheritance

“and among the sons of Israel they shall have no inheritance.”

2. (:24a) Reliance Upon Tithes

“For the tithe of the sons of Israel, which they offer as an offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance;”

3. (:24b) No Land Inheritance

*“therefore I have said concerning them,
“They shall have no inheritance among the sons of Israel.”*

V. (:25-32) SUPPORT OF THE LEVITES INCLUDES THEIR RESPONSIBILITY OF TITHING TO THE LORD

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,”

Brueggemann: Verses 25–32 treat the Levitical obligations to the priesthood. They received a tithe from all the Israelites, and in turn, they gave a tithe to the priests, as though it were produce from their own fields and vineyards (18:26). The remainder belonged to the Levites. Their families could eat it anywhere they wanted, not just at the Tabernacle. Rather than being an expressly cultic meal, it was their “compensation” for Tabernacle service (18:31). They were “*not [to] be considered guilty*” for eating food offered to the Lord; nonetheless, they were to remain “*careful not to treat the holy gifts of the people of Israel as though they were common*” (18:32). The sanction against violating this holiness required death (18:32). The Israelites’ offerings were to be without blemish; in turn, the Levites’ offerings were to be “*the best portions of the gifts*” that Israel gave them (18:29). Postexilic failure to meet this requirement led to punishment (Mal 1:6–8).

A. (:26-29) Responsibility of the Levites to Tithe

1. (:26) Give a Tithe of the Tithe

“Moreover, you shall speak to the Levites and say to them, ‘When you take from the sons of Israel the tithe which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then you shall present an offering from it to the LORD, a tithe of the tithe.’”

Timothy Ashley: At the end of this chapter the author makes it clear that, just as every ordinary Israelite was required to bring a tenth of his or her produce to Yahweh, so the Levite had to do so. Since Yahweh had granted the people's tithes to the Levites, the Levites' tithes would go to the priests.

2. (:27) Give and It Will Be Reckoned as the Fruits of Your Own Labor

“And your offering shall be reckoned to you as the grain from the threshing floor or the full produce from the wine vat.”

3. (:28) Give to the Priest ... to the Lord

“So you shall also present an offering to the LORD from your tithes, which you receive from the sons of Israel; and from it you shall give the LORD's offering to Aaron the priest.”

4. (:29) Give the Best of the Best

“Out of all your gifts you shall present every offering due to the LORD, from all the best of them, the sacred part from them.”

Ronald Allen: The instruction of this section, which Moses is to relate to the Levites, is impressive: those who make their living by contributions for the Lord's work shall themselves be responsible for giving to the Lord as well. There is a tendency, then and now, for persons to believe that if their lives are spent in the Lord's work, then they are exempt from contributing to that work.

B. (:30-32) Right of the Levites to Partake of the Remainder of the Offering

1. (:30) Belongs to You as If You Had Labored for It

“And you shall say to them, 'When you have offered from it the best of it, then the rest shall be reckoned to the Levites as the product of the threshing floor, and as the product of the wine vat.'”

2. (:31) Belongs to You as Compensation for Your Levitical Service

“And you may eat it anywhere, you and your households, for it is your compensation in return for your service in the tent of meeting.”

Timothy Ashley: Once this holy portion is set aside and given as a contribution to the priests, the rest is looked upon as a wage in exchange for your work in the tent of meeting, i.e., it is not holy and may be consumed anywhere by the Levite's whole family.

3. (:32) Belongs to You Without Sin or Guilt

a. As Long as You Tithed the Best of It

“And you shall bear no sin by reason of it, when you have offered the best of it.”

- b. As Long as You Have Not Profaned the Offerings
“But you shall not profane the sacred gifts of the sons of Israel, lest you die.”

Timothy Ashley: When the Levites follow the divine regulation and set aside the tithe of the tithe, consecrating this portion to the use of the priests (v. 29), then there is no penalty for consuming the remainder outside the sacred precincts. But if this consecrated portion is not removed, then by consuming it as a non-priest and by consuming it outside the sacred precincts (into which the Levites cannot go in any case), then the Levites are polluting holy things, which is a capital offense (i.e., encroachment).

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Do we take seriously enough both the responsibilities and privileges of spiritual leadership?
- 2) What protections are there in the local church to guard against usurpers who would try to promote themselves into positions of spiritual leadership?
- 3) How committed is our local church to the support of its full-time ministers?
- 4) What is your perspective towards tithing as you study NT principles for giving?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

J. Ligon Duncan: With God in the Wilderness -- Levites' Duties and Priestly Portion

After reflecting on this chapter, I should have called this sermon “**The Gift of Ministry and Gifts for Ministry.**” If God in this passage emphasizes that He alone gives the gift of ministers to His church, He also in this passage emphasizes that one of the ways we show that we understand that He has given us a gift for ministry is we give back to the support of that ministry. . .

The first part, in **verses 1-7:** God’s gift of the priests and the Levites is reasserted here. The main point of dispute in the rebellion of Korah, if you’ll remember, was the distinction between the Levites and the priests. There were certain Levites who wanted to be priests. There were certain people amongst the children of Israel who had not been appointed by God to be priests, and yet they had demanded that they be allowed to serve as priests.

Well, God had already commanded that there be a distinction between the tribe of Levi and the rest of Israel, and then there would be a distinction within the tribe of Levi, so that the sons of Aaron were to serve as priests and others were to serve as Levites. So God had already commanded that distinction. When the Levites rebelled against that distinction, God judged them. And then, in **chapter 17**, He gave a miraculous sign to reinforce what He had already said about His priests, and now He gives the regulation and the rationale again in **chapter 18** in order to reinforce His command and sign. . .

Now the second half of the chapter addresses the issue of the people of God showing their appreciation for this gift of God, and indicating their understanding of its spiritual importance by tithing for the support of the priests and the Levites. And this is the story of the whole rest of the chapter, from **verse 8** all the way to **verse 32**.

Gordon Wenham: Two groups of priestly perquisites are listed here. First, those sacrifices to which they had sole right, save for a token portion burnt on the altar: the cereal offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering (**Lev. 2; 4:1–6:7; 6:14–7:7**). These were most holy (**9**) and could be eaten only by priests, every male may eat of it (**10**).

The other group of offerings are simply described as holy (**17–18**) and could be eaten by any members of the priest's family as long as they were cultically clean (**11, 19**). These comprise the parts of the peace offerings assigned to the priest: the offering, i.e. the right thigh of the animal, and the wave offerings, i.e. the breast (**11; cf. Lev. 3; 7:31–34**). The priests and their families are also entitled to the first-fruits of the harvest (**13; cf. Exod. 22:29; 23:16, 19; Lev. 2:14; 23:10; Deut. 26:1–4**). They also receive every devoted thing, that is things dedicated to God by a binding oath, usually in war (**14; cf. Lev. 27:28f.; Josh. 6:18ff.; 1 Sam. 15:21**). All first-born animals belong to the priests; the priests must sacrifice them in the normal manner and then they and their families may eat them (**16–19**). Unclean animals (cf. **Lev. 11**) and human first-born which cannot be sacrificed must be redeemed: that is, their owner must make a cash payment to the priest instead of giving him his animal or child. The redemption fee for first-born children is fixed at five shekels, that is about six months' pay (**15–16**). The binding and permanent nature of these obligations is underlined by calling them a covenant of salt, that is to say, this covenant is indestructible, like salt (**19; cf. 2 Chr. 13:5; Exod. 13:2; 22:29f.; 34:19f.; Lev. 27:26–27, 6**).

Roy Gane: The priests will receive seven items as their perpetual entitlement:

1. Portions of most holy sacrifices (**Num. 18:9–10; cf. Lev. 6–7**).
2. Dedicated portions of sacred gifts (**Num. 18:11**), such as the breast and right thigh of holy (not most holy) well-being offerings (**Lev. 7:30–36**).
3. Firstfruits offerings of olive oil, new wine, and grain (**Num. 18:12–13**).
4. Every irrevocably devoted thing (*herem*; **Num. 18:14; cf. Lev. 27:21, 28**).
5. The meat of sacrificeable (clean domestic) firstborn animals (**Num. 18:15–18**).
6. Every portion set aside (noun and Hiphil verb from root *rwm*) from holy offerings given by the Israelites (**18:19**). Here this perpetual entitlement (*hoq 'olam* lit., “eternal statute”) is also called a perpetual “covenant of salt.” Some have suggested that the

latter expression, which emphasizes the binding nature of God's promise to the priests, comes from the ancient Near Eastern practice of using salt in covenant-making ceremonies. **Levine**, however, interprets this verse in light of the stipulation that salt be included with every sacrifice to the Lord. "What the present verse states is that the entitlements assigned to the priests in **vv 8–19** have the same binding force as the rule requiring the salting of sacrifices stated in **Lev 2:13**."

7. A tithe (tenth) of the tithes received by the Levites (**Num. 18:25–32**).

Iain Duguid: There were some rewards for priestly service though. In return for their labors, the priests and Levites received income from their ministry. This income came in a number of forms. The first means of support came through the sacrificial system. The priests had the privilege of receiving part of the meat from the various animals that were sacrificed as sin offerings, guilt offerings, or fellowship offerings (**v. 9**). Part of the animal was offered as a sacrifice on the altar to the Lord, and another part was given to the priest. The same was true for the grain offerings and the wave offerings: 3 part was offered to the Lord on the altar and part given to the priest (**vv. 9–11**). The priests were also to receive all of the firstfruits of the land and the firstborn of the animals (**vv. 12–19**). If the animals were holy (that is, ceremonially clean animals that were unblemished), their blood and fat would be offered as sacrifices, while the meat would belong to the priests. If the animals did not belong to a class that could be offered as sacrifices, such as donkeys or camels, they were to be redeemed by the owner, who was required to pay the market rate for the animal plus 20 percent (see **Leviticus 27:12**). The same requirement of redemption was true of firstborn male babies: they were to be redeemed at the set rate of five shekels of silver, and the money in either case was paid to the priests.

The Levites, meanwhile, were also to be supported in their ministry. Their income would come from the annual tithe of agricultural products in Israel. All of the crops that were grown and all of the produce of the herds were to be tithed annually, with that 10 per cent of the agricultural produce going to the Levites (**v. 21**). This was not to be the least appetizing 10 percent either: the people were to give to the Lord the very best of the oil, the best of the wine, and the best of the grain (**vv. 12, 29**). The Levites were in turn required to tithe their tithe, giving the very best of it to the Lord through the priests (**vv. 28, 29**). The rest was then theirs to enjoy as they wished (**v. 30**). This financial provision for both the priests and the Levites was a recompense for their not being given any land as an inheritance in the Promised Land (**vv. 23, 24**). They had no land to farm, for the Lord was their inheritance, and the care of his sanctuary was their lasting responsibility. They were not to split their focus between earthly and heavenly responsibilities but to devote themselves wholly to eternal things.

Dennis Cole: **18:27, 30–31** These two verses bracket in a brief inclusio the focal point of the section, which is that the choicest of the choicest was to be the source of the Levite tithe that would support the Aaronic priests. Hence, they were accounted to the Levites as if they had produced them on their own. The Levites were a select tribe, set apart by the Lord for special services, and hence were the initial recipients of that which was the best of the Israelite productivity. The sons of Aaron, the priests, were the select

clan from among the select tribe and hence would be due the tribute of only the very finest of that with which God had so blessed his people.

Two key agricultural products, which were the result of processing the raw materials, were to be set aside by the Levites for this tithe, the best grain from the threshing floor and the finest juice from the wine vat after the initial pressing of the grapes. These two items are perhaps used as exemplars for the contributions of the Levites due to their special attributes evidenced throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in the literature and iconography of the ancient Near East. From the painted wall murals of Egypt to the hewn murals of the Hittites in central and eastern Anatolia and the Assyrians of Mesopotamia, the activities and products of grain processing and wine production were esteemed as sacred aspects of human endeavor in utilizing these gifts from the gods. Rites associated with bread and wine held significant places in ancient cultic activities, as they did in ancient Israel. Cultic activities were associated with threshing floors and wine presses, as well as olive presses (see v. 12). In the Book of Numbers particular attention is given to the bread, oil, and wine accompaniments to a number of animal sacrifices.

18:28–29 At the center of this chiasmic construction is the giving of the Levite tithe of their collected tithes to Aaron, the high priest and representative of the entire priesthood. The tribute from the Levites was from the very best, literally “*its fat*” (*ḥēleb*), the same word used to describe the best of the oil, grain, and wine processing in v. 12. Thus only the *creme de la creme* was fitting for the Levite contribution to the priesthood. All of the tribute described in this chapter was deemed “*holy*” (vv. 8, 9, 17), and thus the best was also the holiest.

TEXT: Numbers 19:1-22

TITLE: LAWS ON CLEANSING – DEALING WITH DEFILEMENT FROM DEATH

BIG IDEA:

CLEANSING FROM CONTAMINATION CAUSED BY CONTACT WITH DEATH MAINTAINS CLOSE CONTACT WITH A HOLY GOD

INTRODUCTION:

The previous chapters in Numbers have already addressed the distinctive roles of the priests and Levites and the protection against usurpers who might be envious of other ministry roles. The protection of the Lord's sanctuary is critical since a holy God intended to dwell in the midst of His holy elect people. Here the focus is on the need of the people for **cleansing** and **purification** whenever they come into contact with death – a frequent problem given the Lord's discipline of the current generation dying off in the 38-year wilderness wanderings due to their lack of faith. Defilement was a serious concern – especially since the contamination spread to impact the entire community.

Gordon Wenham: The most serious and obvious type of human uncleanness was that caused by death. Anyone who touched a corpse or a human bone or a grave, or entered the tent of a dead man, became unclean (14–16). Furthermore, this uncleanness was contagious: anything the unclean man touched would itself become unclean and infect others (22; cf. Lev. 15). Thus the death of someone in the camp could pollute all those in it, and this would defile the tabernacle of the Lord (13, 20) unless preventive measures were taken. Whenever the holy came in contact with the unclean, sudden death was the result (13, 20; cf. Lev. 7:21; 22:3; cf. Isa. 6:3, 5).

Chapter 18 was concerned with the appointment of the priests and Levites as custodians of the tabernacle to prevent such divine judgment falling on the nation. This chapter deals with the provision of a means to **cure the uncleanness of death**. Leviticus prescribes two methods of dealing with uncleanness: either washing in water and waiting till evening (11:28, 39–40; 15:16–18), or in more serious cases waiting seven days and then offering a sacrifice (14:10ff.; 15:13ff., 28ff.). Offering a sacrifice was a difficult and expensive procedure, which would have greatly added to the distress of family and friends when someone died. This chapter provides an alternative remedy which marked the seriousness of the pollution caused by death, yet dealt with it without the cost and inconvenience of sacrifice. Instead, those who have come in contact with the dead can be treated with a concoction of water that contains all the ingredients of a sin offering.

Roy Gane: The fact that corpse contamination was considered such a powerful impurity posed a problem for remedying it: The impure person could not come to the sanctuary in order to sacrifice a purification offering, so ritual decontamination had to take place outside the sacred precincts. Also, because priests were to avoid corpse contamination (Lev. 21:1–4, 11), the purification rite needed to be administered by a layperson.

Warren Wiersbe: There are several unique features about this ritual. The animal chosen was not male; it was slain outside the camp, away from the tabernacle and the altar; it was slain by a layman and not a priest; the blood was not caught and poured out before God but burned with the carcass; and the ashes were gathered to be mixed with water and used for ceremonial purification.

Raymond Brown: Four individuals took part in the ceremonial from the time of the heifer's death to the moment of the offender's cleansing: the priest who witnessed the death (3–5), the man who burnt the animal (8), the person who stored the ashes (9) and the individual applying the purifying water (18). Although none of these four had encountered a dead human body, their participation in the purifying event contaminated them.

Timothy Ashley: Ch. 19 gives a relatively simple procedure to cleanse the uncleanness of death. Such a procedure would be important not only in the immediate context, but also in coming days when more and more of the older generation would die in the wilderness. It thus becomes a way of making progress toward Canaan for the younger generation, the generation that would still inherit the land, but not until the older generation was dead. This chapter forms a fitting conclusion to the section on the causes and consequences of rebellion in chs. 11–19. Death is the final consequence, but those heirs of the promise may have fellowship with God by following the divinely given procedure here included.

Dennis Cole: Numbers 19 details the ritual purification process that would be continuously available to the people without having to sacrifice an animal every time there was a death in the family, so it facilitates the maintenance of a holy community of faith. Maintenance of purity and sanctity as a reflection of individual and community holiness in separation from the world's forces is important for all who desire a healthy relationship with a holy God. At this point in the history of revelation, the means of maintaining this relationship included a special ritual process.

I. (:1-10) PREPARATION FOR PURIFICATION – PROCEDURE FOR MAKING THE CLEANSING WATERS FROM THE ASHES OF THE SLAUGHTERED RED COW

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,”

Ronald Allen: This is a fascinating text that rewards the patient reader. . . The material of this chapter is not congenial to modern Western readers. Many have no understanding of or appreciation for the concept of ritual, and the slaughter of a magnificent animal for the purpose of burning its flesh for ash is repugnant. For such readers the opening words of this verse should have a special importance. The ritual of the cleansing waters is presented here as a direct requirement of God. For all its strangeness, this chapter too presents the righteous works of the Lord.

A. (:2-6) Preparation for Purification Via Sacrifice of a Red Cow

1. (:2-3) Slaughter of the Red Heifer

a. (:2) Costliness of Purity

“This is the statute of the law which the LORD has commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel’”

1) Blameless

“that they bring you an unblemished red heifer”

2) No Defect

“in which is no defect,”

3) Never Worked

“and on which a yoke has never been placed.”

Raymond Brown: Before any Israelite had become defiled, a costly sacrifice had been offered. The animal was mature and perfect; it had never been used for ploughing, so there was not the slightest blemish on it. A greatly valued economic asset with the potential to produce calves, it could have provided generous amounts of milk, a source of continuing income. Its young life was cut off so that others would not be cut off (**13, 20**); it died so that unclean people (**7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22**) might be released from their isolating defilement.

Peter Wallace: Find the finest red heifer in all the camp.

- Red – like blood.
- Female – would have been prized for breeding.
- Without blemish – blameless and pure.
- Never yoked – never used for any other purpose.

b. (:3) Conditions for the Slaughter

1) Slaughter Officiated by the Priest

“And you shall give it to Eleazar the priest,”

Dennis Cole: When the qualified cow had been selected, it was then presented to Eleazar, the priest and son of Aaron. Why would Eleazar be chosen instead of Aaron? Several reasons have been suggested. First, Aaron was the high priest, and all caution was taken to ensure that the high priest not become unclean so as to render him unqualified to perform regular ritual activities prescribed for him. The high priest was not to defile himself by going near a corpse, even that of his mother or father (**Lev 21:11**). Second, this ordinance was directed not only to the present but also to future generations. Aaron was now aging and would soon die in the latter stage of the forty-year wilderness experience (**Num 20:22–29**). Also this preparation took place outside the camp, the normal realm of uncleanness where persons having skin diseases and other infirmities were remanded. The high priest was prohibited from going outside the sanctuary, lest he potentially return with some unknown or inadvertent impurity (**Lev 21:12**).

2) Slaughter Removed to a Location Outside the Camp
“and it shall be brought outside the camp”

Raymond Brown: The element of distance from the Tent of Meeting deliberately underlined the essential gap between holiness and defilement, purity and uncleanness. Everything that polluted the community had to be removed from it, so the action deliberately took place away from the holy place. The animal was slaughtered beyond the confines of the camp, in the very place where defiled people must remain until they were thoroughly cleansed.

3) Slaughter Witnessed by the Priest
“and be slaughtered in his presence.”

2. (:4) Sprinkling of the Blood of the Red Heifer

“Next Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood toward the front of the tent of meeting seven times.”

3. (:5-6) Sizzling (Burning) of the Red Heifer

a. (:5) Complete Incineration – Including Burning the Blood

“Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight; its hide and its flesh and its blood, with its refuse, shall be burned.”

Robert Rayburn: Blood is the most potent agent of purification because blood is a symbol of death and purification comes through the death of a substitute.

b. (:6) Complementary Incineration – Involving Burning Other Articles

“And the priest shall take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet material, and cast it into the midst of the burning heifer.”

David Thompson: The priest was to take cedar wood and hyssop and scarlet material and cast it into the midst of the burning heifer (v. 6). We are not sure why the cedar wood is used; perhaps it is because it is a strong wood that emanates a sweet aroma. Some have speculated that Christ’s cross was made of cedar wood. The hyssop plant is a sweet-smelling plant that often symbolized purification from death. This plant normally grew to a height of a little over a foot and contained pointed leaves and colored flowers. The scarlet or crimson red focuses on the fact that this cleansing comes through the shedding of blood. Without the shedding of blood there is *“no forgiveness of sins.”* All of these same ingredients were used to cleanse a leper (**Lev. 14:4, 6, 48, 51-52**).

Eugene Merrill: Cedar was chosen because it is evergreen and aromatic, the hyssop because of its application of the blood at the Exodus (cf. **Ps. 51:7; Ex. 12:22**), and the scarlet wood because it symbolizes the blood itself.

B. (:7-8) Preparation for Purification Via Cleansing of Participants

1. (:7) Cleansing of the Priest

“The priest shall then wash his clothes and bathe his body in water, and afterward come into the camp, but the priest shall be unclean until evening.”

Iain Duguid: In addition to the centrality of blood in this ritual, the other remarkable, even paradoxical feature of this sacrifice was its power to defile the ones preparing and administering it. At the same time as the ashes made the defiled person clean, they also made the ceremonially clean person defiled. From the priest who administered the ritual (v. 7), to the man who burned the animal (v. 8), to the man who gathered the ashes (vv. 9, 10), to the man who sprinkled the water (v. 21), every clean person who touched the ashes was defiled by them. Whoever or whatever they touched in the cleansing process became unclean because of the contagious power of defilement (v. 22). The ashes had to be stored outside the camp so they would not defile the camp by their very presence. It is as if the ashes were a kind of ritual detergent that cleansed the impure person by absorbing their impurity. In the process, though, they themselves became both defiled and defiling.

2. (:8) Cleansing of the One Burning the Red Cow

“The one who burns it shall also wash his clothes in water and bathe his body in water, and shall be unclean until evening.”

C. (:9-10a) Preparation for Purification Via Procedure Regarding the Ashes for the Cleansing Waters

1. (:9a) Procedure for Gathering and Saving the Ashes

“Now a man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer and deposit them outside the camp in a clean place,”

2. (:9b) Procedure for Preparing the Cleansing Waters

“and the congregation of the sons of Israel shall keep it as water to remove impurity; it is purification from sin.”

Raymond Brown: Although other forms of defilement are described earlier in the book (5:1–3), the pollution here is restricted to contacts with death, which, in turn, is deliberately associated with sin: The water of cleansing ... is for purification from sin (9). Sin and death are inseparably linked in biblical teaching. Sin is the cause of death and death is the consequence of sin, teaching that takes us back to the beginning of humanity’s story. Those who are defiled can no longer dwell in the sphere where God lives and reigns; they must remain outside its borders until they are decontaminated by the means provided.

Timothy Ashley: The one who gathers the ashes puts them in a clean place to store them for later when they will be put into a solution called the waters of impurity (*mê niddâ*). Just as the so-called waters of purification (*mê haṭṭā’î*) in 8:7 were for removal

of pollution (*hattā 't*), so here the waters are for the removal of *niddā*, which comes from a word meaning “flee,” and hence may mean “that which makes one flee,” “an abominable thing,” “an impurity.” This same word is used of bodily discharges such as menstruation.

It is a purification offering (*hattā 't hū*). Here it refers to the collected ashes of the burned cow. The simplest meaning of the clause in the present context is that these burnt ashes count as a purification offering, even though a unique one.

Eugene Merrill: Though this was a sin offering, it was different because its purpose was not expiatory. Its purpose was not to remove sin itself, but to remove the contamination of sin which death represented.

3. (:10a) Procedure for Cleansing the One Gathering the Ashes

“And the one who gathers the ashes of the heifer shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening;”

D. (:10b) Preparation for Purification Applies Universally and for All Time

“and it shall be a perpetual statute to the sons of Israel and to the alien who sojourns among them.”

II. (:11-13) PRINCIPLES (GENERAL RULES) FOR PURIFICATION

A. (:11) Reason for Defilement = Touching Dead Corpse – Defiling Power of Death

“The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days.”

Timothy Ashley: The latter part of this chapter gives specific instructions for the use of the waters of impurity that were prepared in vv. 1–10. A general statement of the regulation (v. 11) is followed by a general statement of the remedy (v. 12a) and the penalty for failure to comply with the ritual (vv. 12b–13). Then a more detailed procedure follows, including the manner of the ritual, in vv. 14–22. The heading of the latter unit is “This is the regulation ...” (*zō 't hattôrâ*). The same kind of structure (general regulations followed by more detailed procedures), with the same heading, is found, e.g., in the laws for sacrifice in Lev. 1–6.

Iain Duguid: The purpose of the prohibition of touching a corpse in Numbers 19 was not mere superstition or the fear of contracting disease. Rather, it flowed out of the close connection between death and sin. The Lord is the God of life, and those who would approach him need to reflect that life. The Israelites were being taught that death has no place in his presence, nor does anyone who has had contact with the realm of death. Like matter and antimatter, the Lord and death cannot peaceably coexist: the Lord will ultimately vanquish death (1 Corinthians 15:26), and thus even traces of death adhering to a person made him or her unfit to enter the Lord’s presence.

B. (:12) Remedy for Defilement = Cleansing with Water of Purification

“That one shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and then he shall be clean; but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he shall not be clean.”

C. (:13) Retribution for Defilement Where There is No Purification

1. Penalty: Cut Off from Israel

“Anyone who touches a corpse, the body of a man who has died, and does not purify himself, defiles the tabernacle of the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from Israel.”

2. Pronouncement: He Remains Unclean

“Because the water for impurity was not sprinkled on him, he shall be unclean; his uncleanness is still on him.”

Dennis Cole: vv. 11-13

Who?	Anyone who comes into contact with a dead person’s body
Why?	Renders unclean, ritually impure for seven days
How?	Purification with water of cleansing on third and seventh days
What if/not?	Failure to comply renders one impure; defiles sanctuary Anyone who remains impure must be cut off from the community

III. (:14-21a) PROCESS OF APPLYING PURIFICATION

A. (:14-16) Case Law -- Two Contrasting Situations

1. (:14-15) Interior -- Case of Death in a Tent

a. (:14) Regarding People

“This is the law when a man dies in a tent: everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent shall be unclean for seven days.”

Dennis Cole: The second section of the chapter begins with the abbreviated form of the phrase that introduced the legislation in the chapter that defined the preparation of the ashes and the general guidelines governing its usage. *“This is the Torah”* (*zō’t hattôrâ*, *“This is the instruction”*) commences the specific areas of application of the purification offering of the ashes of the red cow. This section divides into four parts:

- (1) answers the questions as to who, what, and how uncleanness is contracted (**vv. 14–16**),
- (2) addresses the issue of procedure in rectifying the uncleanness state (**vv. 17–19**),
- (3) affirms the consequences of noncompliance (**v. 20**), and
- (4) asserts the matter of cleansing for the person who carries out the ritual cleansing process.

b. (:15) Regarding Open Vessels

“And every open vessel, which has no covering tied down on it,

shall be unclean.”

Robert Rayburn: All of this indicates how ritually symbolic this material is. If you are inside the tent, things become unclean. But outside the tent nothing becomes unclean as if somehow the material from which the tent is constructed keeps things from being unclean. If the lid is off a jar, what is in the jar becomes unclean. If the lid is on the jar, what is in the jar remains clean. All that is accessible to the dead body is unclean. Nothing outside the tent would be; nothing securely covered would be. This is not a principle of the spiritual life; it is a *symbol* of a principle of the spiritual life.

2. (:16) Exterior -- Case of Death in the Open Field

“Also, anyone who in the open field touches one who has been slain with a sword or who has died naturally, or a human bone or a grave, shall be unclean for seven days.”

B. (:17-19) 3 Stages in the Process for Applying the Cleansing Waters of Purification

1. (:17) Creating the Purification Mixture

“Then for the unclean person they shall take some of the ashes of the burnt purification from sin and flowing water shall be added to them in a vessel.”

Roy Gane: Purification of contaminated persons and spaces involves first mixing some ashes of the red cow with “*living water*,” that is, fresh water (**19:17**). “Living water” is appropriate, given that the ritual is to remedy association with death. Next, a ritually pure person will apply the “*water of lustration*” by dipping hyssop in it and sprinkling whatever dwellings, their contents, and/or persons need purification (**19:18**).

2. (:18) Cleansing the Unclean Person(s)

“And a clean person shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there, and on the one who touched the bone or the one slain or the one dying naturally or the grave.”

3. (:19) Cleansing the One Performing the Ritual

“Then the clean person shall sprinkle on the unclean on the third day and on the seventh day; and on the seventh day he shall purify him from uncleanness, and he shall wash his clothes and bathe himself in water and shall be clean by evening.”

Raymond Brown: The recurrence of three and seven is significant. Three leading elements (blood, fire and water) are supported by the three subsidiary components of cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet thread. Defiled people must wash themselves on the third day (**12**) and have the purifying water applied (**19**). The priest sprinkled the heifer’s blood seven times (**4**), defiled people remained unclean for seven days (**11**) and the decontaminating process was not complete until that seven-day period had expired

(19). The repetition of the ritual on both the third and the seventh day may emphasize both the seriousness of the pollution and the efficacy of the cleansing; the numbers three and seven both indicate completeness, wholeness and thoroughness in Scripture.

Dennis Cole: At the conclusion of the ritual sprinkling of the ashes and water mixture, the previously clean person who had applied the purifying potion was to undergo the same ritual bathing process as the priest and his assistants who prepared and gathered the ashes (vv. 7, 8, 10). That person would wash his garments, then bathe himself with pure water, yet remain in a state of uncleanness until sundown. Then he could reclothe himself with the purified garments, and he could be deemed as clean and able to participate in the holiness of the community.

C. (:20) Penalty for Not Using the Cleansing Waters of Purification

1. Death Penalty

“But the man who is unclean and does not purify himself from uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from the midst of the assembly, because he has defiled the sanctuary of the LORD;”

Brueggemann: The person’s neglect or refusal of the purification ritual was a high-handed sin for which sacrifice was no longer possible, since they had refused the means of grace. Those who refused this water of purification would “defile the Lord’s Tabernacle,” so they were to be “*cut off from the community of Israel*” (19:13, 20). This defilement was contagious: Anything a defiled person touched became defiled (19:22). Exposure to a human corpse defiled anyone in the tent where death occurred (19:14) or even an open container in that tent (19:15). Touching even a bone or grave defiled (19:16), so graves were whitewashed, to help people avoid inadvertent contact with them (Matt 23:27; Luke 11:44). But God provided a means of cleansing, even from serious defilement.

2. Declared Permanently Unclean

“the water for impurity has not been sprinkled on him, he is unclean.”

D. (:21a) Perpetual Application of the Ordinance

“So it shall be a perpetual statute for them.”

(:21b-22) APPENDIX – DEALING WITH SECONDHAND UNCLEANNESS

A. (:21b) Cleansing People

“And he who sprinkles the water for impurity shall wash his clothes, and he who touches the water for impurity shall be unclean until evening.”

B. (:22a) Cleansing Objects

“Furthermore, anything that the unclean person touches shall be unclean;”

C. (:22b) Cleansing People

“and the person who touches it shall be unclean until evening.”

Timothy Ashley: The last part of the passage continues to deal with uncleanness. The cases here, however, do not issue from direct contact with the dead, but rather from contact with the waters of impurity or with one who has contacted the dead. For this reason these regulations fall outside the main body of the passage, and look like an **appendix**. The one who has sprinkled the waters of impurity on the unclean persons and their possessions himself becomes unclean, because the procedure is a purification offering, which does make the officiator unclean (**Lev. 16:28**). Any person who even touches the waters of impurity shall be unclean. This is because the purification offering absorbs the uncleanness of the one cleansed. Anyone who touches that one (i.e., the one who is unclean) becomes unclean, along with everything that the unclean one touches. This derivative or secondhand uncleanness is of the less serious variety; it is effective only until the evening and may be cleansed by scrubbing garments.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How much attention should we give to **allegorical interpretation** of the various details of this ritual?
- 2) When we sin and seek the Lord’s forgiveness, do we take seriously our need for **cleansing** through the shed blood of Jesus Christ?
- 3) Why is contact with death so **defiling** in the biblical worldview?
- 4) What do passages from the **book of Hebrews** contribute to our understanding and appreciation of the doctrines represented in this text?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Dennis Cole: Different structure proposed for chapter:

Each section beginning with the phrase *“this is the law”* (*zō`t hūqqat hattôrâ*, *“this is the statute of law”* in v. **2a**, and *zō`t hattôrâ*, *“this is the law”* in v. **14a**).

Panel A (19:2a–13)

“This is the ritual law” (19:2a)
Preparation of the ashes
Renders impure (19:2b–10)
Purification procedure (19:11–12)
Penalty for nonpurification (19:13)

Panel B (19:14–22)

“This is the ritual” (19:14a/a)
Touching corpse or its derivatives
Renders impure (19:14–16)
Purification procedure (19:17–19)
Penalty for nonpurification (19:20)
“Law for all time” (19:21a)
[Addition (21b–22)]

Ronald Allen: The text is like a dance: each move is specified, each step choreographed. There is color and pageantry. There is also drama and death. The senses are assaulted throughout. One hears the mooing of the cow as she is led outside the camp. There is the violent stroke of the knife against the bound animal's neck, likely the severing of the carotid artery, the quickest way to kill an animal by a knife. One hears her muffled bleating as she bleeds from her death wound. There is the priest dipping his finger in the blood and making seven flicks of the dripping finger toward the holy altar. One smells the acrid odor of the fire, the admixture of cedar and hyssop adding their own sweet-awful smells.

Gordon Wenham: For serious uncleanness sin offerings were an essential part of the process of expiation. The standard procedure with a sin offering was to sprinkle some of the animal's blood over the altar or over part of the tabernacle to cleanse it from sin. Some parts of the animal were burnt on the main altar, but most of it was burnt outside the camp (**Lev. 4:1–21**). In the case of the red heifer we do not have a proper sacrifice, in that the slaughtering of the animal takes place outside the camp, not by the altar; and though the animal is burnt, the word used, *śārap*, denotes a non-sacrificial burning. What is important here is producing ash with purificatory properties. It is for this reason that the blood is burnt (**5**), something without parallel elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Blood is the most potent cleansing and sanctifying agent in the Bible (cf. **Heb. 9:22**). For the same reason other traditional cleansing agents are also thrown into the fire to fortify the ash: cedar wood, hyssop (*marjoram*, *Origanum maru*, is meant), and scarlet stuff were also used in the cleansing of the leper (**Lev. 14:4**, cf. **Ps. 51:7**). Presumably, similar reasons lay behind the insistence on a red heifer. Normally the animal's colour did not matter. This one had to be red to resemble blood. Heifer (rsv) is more accurately rendered 'cow' by the neb. However, if it had never been used for ploughing or pulling a cart (**2**), it must have been relatively young, hence the traditional English translation.

When the ash had been prepared, it was collected and kept outside the camp ready to be mixed with water when required. It thus acted as an instant sin offering (**9**, neb). When someone came in contact with a corpse, some of the ash was mixed with fresh water, and the liquid was sprinkled over him, using a sprig of marjoram (**18**). This had to be done twice, on the third and the seventh day after contact (**12, 19**). Failure to undergo this ritual led to the unclean person being cut off, that is suffering a sudden and premature death (**13, 20**).

Both those who prepare the ash and those who sprinkle the water containing it become unclean, though not as seriously as the man who has touched the corpse. All they need to do is to wash and wait till evening (**7–10, 21**). Though perplexing at first sight, this is quite consonant with the ash being regarded as a cleanser like blood. Sacrificial blood is cleansing when correctly used, but garments or vessels accidentally splashed with it must be washed or destroyed (**Lev. 6:27–28**). Similarly, it is the discharge of blood associated with menstruation and childbirth that makes them occasions for uncleanness (**Lev. 12; 15:19ff.**).

Raymond Brown: With such a **recurrent emphasis on death** it is natural that, at this point in the story, some instruction should be given to the Israelite people about how they should react to the presence of a dead body.

There was also a **theological dimension** to death in the community. It challenged their understanding of God as both living and holy. They worshipped the living God, and the presence of a dead human body was alien to all they knew of God, the giver and custodian of life. The departure of life was a sinister phenomenon; it seemed as though God had forsaken the body he had created. They also worshipped a holy God, but their experience of death was that the lifeless corpse would rapidly deteriorate and decompose. Its presence was ‘incompatible with the holiness of God’, who demanded purity in the life of the community. A dead body exposed them to spiritual defilement as well as to physical contamination. The presence of death affronted the divine holiness; they must keep away from it.

There may have been an innate **social aspect** to this fear of a lifeless human body. The unburied corpse was a serious health hazard. In oppressive climates, rapid decomposition might lead to widespread infection, and regulations such as these encouraged them to keep their distance from places where a person had recently died. The camp must be kept clean at all costs (5:1–4). . .

Several features **distinguish this ritual** from the offerings described elsewhere in the Pentateuch. First, contrary to sacrificial practice, it was a cow, not a bull, that was to be slaughtered. The priest was not a key figure throughout. He was present when the cow was killed, and sprinkled a little of its blood on his finger, towards the front of the Tent of Meeting (4); his main function was as a witness of what was happening rather than the leading officiant. The slaughter was to take place not at the Tent of Meeting but at the outskirts of the camp. There is no specific moment when the individual presenting the cow was to identify himself with the offering by laying his hand on the animal, as was customary with animal sacrifices. Most unusual of all, at the incineration even the blood of the animal was to be burnt, which distinguishes it from other Old Testament offerings where the blood was drained away and the hide and offal used for other purposes.

A further unusual feature is that all involved in this cleansing procedure became defiled simply because they had participated. The rabbis noted that these purificatory waters ‘purify the defiled and defile the pure’. We are presented here with an ordinance that appears to function in a variant manner and to serve a purpose different from that of the priestly rituals described elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Its most distinctive feature lies in the preservation of these ashes for use at a later event. Other sacrifices in the Old Testament have a sense of immediacy about them; the red-heifer ritual is designed to meet inevitable requirements in the future rather than needs in the present. . .

A good guide in explaining **symbolism** is to allow one passage of Scripture to interpret another. If a symbol is meant to signify a particular truth in one setting, it may well convey a similar message in another. With this in mind, we turn to examine the symbolism employed in these regulations.

The substances used

Three familiar components play a significant part: blood (**4**), fire (**5**) and water (**17**), agents of cleansing in the biblical tradition. The heifer was red (**2**; the only place in the Old Testament where the colour of a sacrificial animal is prescribed), and to the fire the priest added cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool (**6**); the colour of the animal and of the wool is the same as that of blood, an essential component in the cleansing process. These three 'ritual detergents' that were added to the flames also figured in the purification of someone suffering from an infectious skin disease, another ritual of cleansing from pollution.

The symbolism of **cedar wood** illustrates the problem of precise interpretation. Its recognized strength and characteristic durability may suggest permanence and illustrate the continuing effectiveness of this cleansing process, or it may simply have been used for its known aromatic qualities, enhancing the '*aroma pleasing to the LORD*', a phrase found in other rituals (**15:3, 7, 10, 14, 24**). **Hyssop** had Passover associations and may have symbolized deliverance from death, as at the exodus. Its pragmatic use (**18**) was eclipsed by its spiritual message. As at Passover, it was 'the instrument of the application' and retained the 'symbolism of applied efficacy'. The recipient could gratefully say, 'That sacrifice was for me.' . . .

Crucial spiritual values and high moral standards were preserved in this basic command about contamination by a corpse. The defilement polluted the individual. The offence could not be ignored or marginalized. It is a visual reminder of the contaminating effects of sin in human life. Men and women are seriously damaged by it, and become less than the people they would, in their better moments, like to be.

Moreover, personal defilement affects others. If it was not dealt with in the manner the Lord prescribed, the contamination would spread from the defiled person to others. An offender who had not been cleansed must be cut off from the community (**20**). Such a person was a moral and spiritual hazard in the camp. That is the really destructive thing about human sin; it speedily transmits itself from one victim to the next. Even when we sin secretly (as in sins of thought), we emerge morally and spiritually less than we might have been. . .

Our problem is infinitely more serious than that of the polluted Israelites. They were disturbed by ceremonial impurity; we are guilty of moral corruption. They were at fault because they had touched a corpse; our offence is that we are dead, slain by sin's destructive power in our lives. Those who are '*dead in ... transgressions and sins*' can be made alive only by coming to the Christ who died for them and rose again. . .

The red heifer's ritual imagery foreshadows Christ's achieving eternal salvation for defiled humanity. By his unique death and resurrection, those who are outside the camp, '*far away*' in spiritual terms, are brought within the redeemed community. First, the heifer had to be unblemished (without defect, **2**). Dedicated to this unique purpose, it had never been under a yoke (**2**). The spotlessly perfect Son of God came into the world solely and entirely to do God's will by procuring our salvation.

Secondly, a death in the past effects cleansing in the present. The animal was killed not simply to respond to an immediate emergency but to meet an ultimate need. This feature distinguishes it from the usual sacrificial system of the Old Testament. Although Christ died for us historically on that first Good Friday, the benefits of his death are as effective for us as on the day of his transforming sacrifice.

Thirdly, only undefiled people could administer the cleansing ritual. A man who is clean (**9**) collects and preserves the ashes, and later, at the moment of need, a man who is ceremonially clean (**18**) sprinkles the purifying waters on the defiled man or woman. Christ is both the cleansing sacrifice and the one who mediates its benefits to us, and he is without sin, as New Testament writers frequently affirm.

Fourthly, the decontamination process involved the absorption of the impurity. The uncleanness was taken up by the one administering the cleansing process. As the Lord Jesus died on the cross he absorbed our sin into his own person, so that, as Paul expresses it movingly, '*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*'. Using the famous Servant Song of Isaiah, Peter richly expresses the same truth: '*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.*'

Fifthly, the decontaminating procedure was costly; the unpolluted people who collected the ashes and later sprinkled the cleansing waters became unclean. The greatest cost of our Saviour's unique sacrifice was that a pure, holy and righteous Father turned his face from his sin-bearing Son, so that Jesus cried out in anguish, '*My God ... why have you forsaken me?*'

Finally, the red heifer had to be slain outside the camp. A sacrifice for the sin of defilement had to take place away from the holy sanctuary at the centre of the camp. Jesus was taken outside the city to Calvary, the arena of death, rejected by his contemporaries and thrust beyond the confines of their religious institutions. In order to effect the cleansing of their fellow Israelites, some members of the community had to be prepared to leave the safe confines of the camp and make their way beyond its boundaries to help those who, unless purified from their pollution, could not hope to come within the clean and secure community.

Yet, however rich the Christological parallels within this impressive red-heifer ritual, one huge factor separates this Old Testament means of cleansing from its fulfilment in the unique sacrifice of Christ. That fulfilling sacrifice is the leading theme of the letter to the Hebrews. It was of the greatest importance in Old Testament times for the camp to be kept clean from defilement. The pollution was real and isolating, but the cleansing

available was nothing other than ceremonial purification. It did not reach into what Bunyan called the ‘disturbed’ or ‘wounded’ conscience. Christ’s sacrifice was not a ceremonial de-pollution exercise but an inner cleansing that washes the sinner completely clean. *‘The ... ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!’* This red-heifer provision anticipated something infinitely greater. The sprinkled water permitted the defiled Israelite to rejoin the camp; the shed blood of Christ enables the cleansed sinner to enter heaven.

Iain Duguid: Once again the sacrificial ritual of the red cow makes it all clear. Remember that this ritual required two things for the cleansing to take place. There had to be a spotless sacrifice who was slaughtered to provide the means necessary for cleansing and a clean person who was willing to give up that state of ritual cleanliness and access to God for the sake of another. Both aspects of the ritual point forward to Jesus, the one who gave us his perfect holiness as our clean substitute and suffered for us as the spotless sacrifice. These two aspects of Jesus taking our place are what theologians call the active and passive obedience of Christ. On the one hand, there is the active obedience of Christ: this is the means by which Jesus became our clean substitute. He is the only human being who has ever been perfectly clean. We could have called a surprise inspection of his life at any moment, but we would never have found a speck of dirt where it didn’t belong. He lived his life in perfect alignment with God’s Law, in perfect tune with God’s harmony. He thus took our place as the law-keeper, the clean one who administers the cleansing sacrifice for us.

But there is more. In addition to his perfect life, there is also his death for you and me—his passive obedience. He has not only taken our place as the law-keeper—he has also taken the place we deserved as law-breakers. He went outside the camp and offered his own blood as the atoning sacrifice: through his death he paid the debt for all of the sins of his people, and he became defiled in the process. As Paul puts it: “[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). Just as in the offering of the red cow, the clean one had to become defiled, so the defiled one could be made clean, Jesus took our sins upon himself. If Jesus has died and made full payment for our sins, however, there is no payment left for us to make on them. God can’t punish two people for the same offense. If Jesus has taken our defilement into himself, there is no stain left upon us. The foul spot has finally been purged away, transmitted to Christ. Therefore, because God is faithful and just, and the penalty for our sin has been paid in full, he must and will forgive all who are followers of Jesus for all of their sins.

J. Ligon Duncan: The Red Heifer

Given that Korah has led a rebellion of Levites against Moses and Aaron, and those Levites want to be priests, it makes perfect sense that in **chapter 18** he would cover ritual requirements for the priests and the Levites, and then in **chapter 19** that he would deal with ritual defilement relating to the people. . .

Death was a standing issue, and so it is a picture of God's loving, caring concern for His people that He talks with them about how they ought to respond to death. This is especially important in light of the fact that the cultures around them had all manner of wrong responses to death. The cultures around Israel were often involved in the cult of the dead, in the worship of the dead; they would offer food sacrifices to the dead. They would come to the graves of the dead with food and put it there; they would attempt to commune with the dead through occult practices, and God wanted nothing of that in Israel. And so He spends an entire chapter informing the children of Israel of how they need to respond to death. This makes sense because of the context of death in the wilderness. Death was everywhere. . .

You see the picture of the permeating and the contaminating nature of death and judgment in Israel. Any contact with the dead leads to this ritual impurity. Any vessel that has been touched or in the presence of someone who has died, or has been touched by someone who has been in the presence of someone who has died, becomes unclean. There is a contaminating effect of death that requires cleansing, and thus an elaborate ritual is established for the cleansing of those who have so been contaminated, defiled, and made unclean. And in that elaborate ritual we see a beautiful pointing, a beautiful anticipation, of the work of Jesus Christ. I'd like you to see seven things in particular that we learn from this passage tonight.

I. The first thing is this. Notice that as the heifer was to be without spot or blemish, so also Christ was without spot or blemish. **1 Peter 1:19**

II. Secondly, and very interestingly, if you'll look at **Numbers 19:9**, in this ceremony of the red heifer something very interesting happens: a death in the past continues to effect cleansing later. **Heb. 7:9, 10, 27; 9:12, 26; 10:10**

III. Thirdly, isn't it interesting — and you see this in **verses 9 and 18** in Numbers 19 — that the only person who can administer the ashes, who can sprinkle the blood, who can deliver the cleansing potency and effect of this sacrifice, the only person who can administer it is a clean person? **Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 John 3:5**

IV. Fourth, in **Numbers 19** — and I want you to look for both this point and the next to **verses 7, 8, and 10**, in Numbers 19 — in Numbers 19, we find out that the process of decontaminating those who have been defiled by coming into contact with death renders everyone involved in the process of decontamination contaminated. **2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:24**

V. There's this power in the Creator God in the person of Christ — everything He touches becomes clean, and He does not become unclean. Though He absorbs our sin, though He bears our sin, though He bears our punishment and our guilt, He is unblemished.

VI. And then there's this fifth thing: the decontamination process is costly. Look again at **Numbers 19:7, 8, 10**.

VI. Sixthly, the red heifer is slain outside the camp; not at the altar, but outside the camp. **Num.19:3; Heb. 13:12-13**

VII. **Hebrews 9:13, 14**, and then I want to read **Hebrews 9:22-10:10**.

Robert Rayburn: [Quoting **C.S. Lewis**] - It is one thing to believe in forgiveness; it is another thing altogether to glory in it, to bask in it, to rejoice in it! How kind the Lord is: an instant sin offering available to you whenever you need it. And easier now even than it was for the ancient church. Cleansing whenever, for whatever it is needed. Always it is possible to be clean! Nothing more is required but that one desire this purity and ask for it in Jesus' name.

A friend met **John Duncan**, the inimitable "Rabbi" Duncan, on an Edinburgh street one day when political developments were very much in the news and the subject of everyone's conversations. "Is there any news today?" the friend asked Duncan. "Oh, yes," he replied, "this is always news, *the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin.*" [*Just a Talker*, xxxiii]

David Thompson: It was important that the priests faithfully carry out their responsibilities just as God prescribed and it was also important that they be clean. If Israel wanted God's blessings, they needed to be clean and if we want God's blessings, we also need to be clean. To inherit God's eternity, one cannot be unclean, but must be clean. No one became clean by works, but by substituting sacrifice. That cleanliness only comes through a sacrifice and cleansing water.

AS GOD BROUGHT ISRAEL NEAR THE PROMISED LAND, IT WAS CRITICAL THAT EVERY PERSON BE CEREMONIALLY CLEAN AND PURE THROUGH THE OFFERING AND THE ASHES OF THE RED HEIFER AND BY WASHING WITH WATER.

PRACTICAL THOUGHTS:

1. God will not accept the worship of those who are unclean.
 2. God will not fellowship with those unclean.
 3. God will not bless those who are unclean.
 4. God offers cleansing grace found in the blood of Jesus Christ (**I John 1:7-9**).
 5. God offers washing grace found in the written Word of God (**Ephesians 5:26**).
 6. One who is unclean needs to confess the sin and turn to Jesus Christ for cleansing.
 7. We need constant cleansing because in this world death is stamped on everything.
- (**A. C. Gaebelein**, *Numbers*, p. 337)

TEXT: Numbers 20:1-29

TITLE: *SAD TIMES IN THE WILDERNESS FOR FAILED LEADERS*

BIG IDEA:

THE LEADERSHIP TRANSITION FOR THE NEW GENERATION THAT WILL ENTER THE PROMISED LAND (DESPITE THEIR CONTINUING CONTENDING AND COMPLAINING) REQUIRES THE DEATH OF ITS FAILED LEADERS

INTRODUCTION:

This is a sad chapter indeed. Sandwiched between the accounts of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, we have the record of the disqualifying failure of Moses at the waters of Meribah and the obstinate refusal of Edom to grant safe passage. Despite a track record of significant leadership success, at the end of the day we find that Miriam and Aaron and Moses are unable to “Finish Strong” and are shut out of the opportunity of entering the Promised Land. However, the Lord remains gracious and merciful and faithful to His covenant promises and transfers priestly leadership to Eleazar as preparations begin for the coming invasion of Canaan.

Gordon Wenham: From Kadesh to the plains of Moab (20:1–22:1)

The brief notice of the death of Miriam (20:1) introduces the third and last travel narrative in Exodus–Numbers. The first deals with the journey from the Red Sea to Sinai (Exod. 13–19); the second covers that from Sinai to Kadesh (Num. 11–12), while this final one summarizes the journeyings from Kadesh to Transjordan (Num. 20–21). As was noted in the Introduction, certain motifs occur in all three travelogues, e.g. battles with enemies (Exod. 14; 17:8–16; Num. 14:45; 21:1–35), complaints about the lack of food and water and its miraculous provision (Exod. 16–17; Num. 11; 20:2–13), the need for faith (Exod. 14:31; Num. 14:11; 20:12), the role of Moses, Aaron and Miriam (Exod. 15:20–21; Num. 12; 20:1). . .

But the third journey proceeds quite differently. It begins in gloom and ends on a note of subdued but real jubilation. **Chapter 20** records the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, and Moses’ unbelief that shut him out of Canaan. But this is followed in **chapter 21**, by victory at Hormah, where years earlier Israel had been defeated (cf. 14:45), and further victories over Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, are accompanied by short songs of celebration (21:14–15, 17–18, 27–30). These three victories and their songs recall the first and greatest victory over Egypt by the Red Sea that Moses and Miriam had hailed in **Exodus 15**. Thus this final travel narrative inverts the patterns found in the earlier two; whereas they recount triumphs that turned into tragedy, this tells of tragedy that ends in triumph and a reawakened hope of entry into the promised land.

Raymond Brown: The chapter opens and closes with a family bereavement. Within four months (20:1; 33:38), Moses lost both his sister and his brother. Sadly, since the

departure from Egypt both Miriam and Aaron had featured in discouraging events, and the Scripture makes no secret of their alarming disloyalty (12:1–16). Yet, despite their mistakes, they had been his life-long partners, to say nothing of their devoted family ties. At the beginning of his life Miriam had been a protective sister, and later Aaron had proved a supportive brother. To be suddenly bereft of their help and companionship at such a crucial stage in the long journey must have been a severe loss.

Roy Gane: This is a sad chapter. The deaths of Miriam at the beginning (20:1) and Aaron at the end (20:22–29) frame a dispute of the Israelites over water at Kadesh (20:2–13) and Edomite refusal to let the Israelites pass from Kadesh through their territory (20:14–21). The chapter is united by the location at Kadesh and the fact that Aaron dies at Mount Hor on the way around Edom for his failure with Moses regarding the water (20:24). The gloom of this chapter is only implicitly relieved by the fact that Israel and its high priestly office survive to trudge on toward better days.

MacArthur: These chapters (20–22) record the beginning of the transition from the old generation (represented by Miriam and Aaron) to the new generation (represented by Eleazar). Geographically, Israel moves from Kadesh (20:1) to the plains of Moab (22:1) from where the conquest of the Land would be launched. There is an interval of 37 years between 19:22 and 20:1.

(:1) PROLOGUE -- DEATH OF MIRIAM MARKS THE BEGINNING OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

“Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried there.”

Timothy Ashley: The note simply records her death as that of the first of the old-generation leaders. Perhaps the author felt it important to mention her death here before the events of vv. 2–13. Although the text does not mention mourning (cf. the death of Aaron, 20:24; and of Moses, Deut. 34:8), this does not mean that there was no period of mourning for her. Perhaps the only tradition available concerned the fact that she died at Kadesh. Miriam was last mentioned in 12:1–16. She had been preeminent in the rebellion of Israel’s leaders against Moses (Aaron, Korah, and others followed). Rebellion against God brings death.

Dennis Cole: Miriam’s death and burial is reported with simple reverence. She was a leader among the Israelites, a prophetess and songstress (Exod 15:20–21), sister of the divinely chosen high priest and prophetic leader of the nation, who demonstrated her compassionate character soon after Moses was born (Exod 2:4–9). Miriam was gone, the only woman whose death has been remembered from that generation. The love Moses had for Miriam was demonstrated when she was struck with a leprous skin disease after she challenged Moses’ authority (Num 12:1–13). Appalled by what he saw affecting his beloved sister, he dramatically cried out for the Lord to heal her. Then in honor of Miriam, the nation delayed its march for the required period of seven days

for her purification before it continued on its divinely led journey from Hazeroth to the Paran Wilderness. What effect Miriam's death had on Moses' rebellion in the verses that follow one can only speculate. I would suggest that these events are juxtapositioned purposefully in the text, and were thus at least a contributing factor to the prophet's demise. The death of Moses' dear sister Miriam may have caused the prophet to enter a period of depression or even despair, which might have led him to respond so negatively in the following account.

I. (:2-13) GRUMBLING AND GLORY-GRABBING AT THE WATERS OF MERIBAH

A. (:2-5) Grumbling by the People in Questioning the Goodness and Faithfulness of God's Provision

1. (:2) Antagonism of Deprivation

*“And there was no water for the congregation;
and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron.”*

Gordon Wenham: Particularly remarkable, though, is this story's similarity with that recorded in **Exodus 17:1–7**, the first occasion when Israel complained about a total lack of water. Both times the people contended with Moses, and asked Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? Both times Moses is told to take a rod and use it to bring water out of the rock. Both places are called as a result of the incident Meribah (**13**).

2. (:3-5) Arguments of Contention

“The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying,”

Raymond Brown: They opposed his servants. Instead of approaching their leaders as effective intercessors, the crowds treated them as moral scapegoats. Throughout the years, Moses and Aaron had had a bad time of it with this unhappy mob, and the grounds of their complaint now were much the same: things had been infinitely better in their idealized past. Their present diet was detestable and life's future prospects were agonizing (**21:4–5**). The crowd gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. Ostensibly, this unhappy congregation quarreled with Moses (**3**) but, in reality, they were complaining against God.

One “*If Only*” argument and Two “*Why*” arguments:

a. (:3) If Only We Had Perished Already –

Questioning God's Love

*“If only we had perished
when our brothers perished before the LORD!”*

Raymond Brown: Far from being humbled and chastened by the experience of the earlier rebels, they wished it had happened to them.

b. (:4) Why Have You Led Us Into This God-Forsaken Wilderness –

Questioning God's Goodness

*“Why then have you brought the LORD's assembly
into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here?”*

Iain Duguid: Two familiar patterns of sin in their complaint are problems for us as well: **catastrophizing** and **blame-shifting**. Catastrophizing means that we paint our situation in far darker colors than is really warranted. Was their situation in the wilderness really a fate worse than death by fire (v. 3)? They may have been thirsty and missing some of their favorite foods, but the Lord had supplied those needs before, and he could do it again. They weren't really as bad off as they alleged—and often neither are we. Isn't it amazing how full of woe we can be while we are still healthy, surrounded by a family that loves us, with a roof over our heads? If we lack anything, is it too hard for the Lord to supply what we need? Instead of catastrophizing and anticipating the worst, we need to take our concerns to the Lord and trust in his goodness and power to provide for us in the situation.

c. (:5) Why Have You Misled Us with False Promises –

Questioning God's Faithfulness

*“And why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in
to this wretched place?”*

*It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is
there water to drink.”*

Raymond Brown: They frequently recalled the luxurious meals of Egypt (**11:5; 16:13**) or visualized the attractive diet of Canaan (**16:14**), and saw both in stark contrast to their barren wilderness experience. Longing for what we want, we ignore what we have received. They forgot his mighty acts of deliverance. They ignored the daily evidence of his presence and the nightly assurance of his protection. They despised his unfailing gift of nourishing food, the ready supply of necessary water and restful locations where they enjoyed shelter. They marginalized his immense kindness in keeping them free from sickness and disease, even protecting their feet from discomfort and their clothing from wearing out. During those long years in the desert, they had *‘not lacked anything’*. But they were not remotely grateful. Moses and Aaron listened to the complaints of the multitude until they could bear it no longer. They went from the company of a disgruntled people into the presence of a holy God.

B. (:6-11) Glory-Grabbing by Moses Out of Frustration for Persistent Contention

1. (:6a) Another Face Plant

*“Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly
to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces.”*

2. (:6b) Another Appearance of the Glory of God

“Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them;”

3. (:7-8) Detailed Instructions on How to Obtain Water

*“and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 8 ‘Take the rod; and you and
your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock*

before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.”

Timothy Ashley: Is it Aaron’s rod that budded (**17:23** [Eng. **8**]) or Moses’ own rod with which he, e.g., struck the Nile in Egypt (**Exod. 7:17, 20**) and the rock at Rephidim (**Exod. 17:6**)? The most logical choice would seem to be the former, since the phrase from the presence of Yahweh (*millip̄nê YHWH*) in v. **9** is probably a direct reference to the fact that this rod had been placed “*before Yahweh*” (*lip̄nê YHWH*) and had been taken “*from Yahweh’s presence*” (*millip̄nê YHWH*) and replaced “*before the testimony*” (*lip̄nê hā’ēdūt*) in the tent of meeting (**17:22, 24–25** [Eng. **7, 9–10**]). The question of whose rod it is would probably not have come up were it not called his (Moses’) rod in v. **11**. This phrase implies only that Moses was in possession of the rod. . .

The word for rock here (*sela’*) is different from that of **Exod. 17**, and indicates a cliff or crag. Most interpret the fact that the noun has the definite article to indicate that it was well known.

4. (:9-11) Faulty Execution of the Lord’s Instructions

a. (:9-10a) Starts Out with Obedience

*“So Moses took the rod from before the LORD,
just as He had commanded him;
and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock.”*

b. (:10) Continues with Angry Frustration and Glory Grabbing

*“And he said to them, ‘Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring
forth water for you out of this rock?’”*

Raymond Brown: but, instead of speaking to the rock, he spoke to the people.

Iain Duguid: Not only did Moses set himself up as the people’s judge, he also set himself (and Aaron) up as their deliverers. He said, “Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” (v. **10**). Then he struck the rock twice, as if it were his action that brought forth the water. Who provided water from the rock for the people? It was the Lord, of course. In his frustration with the people, Moses was drawn into the same mind-set they had, forgetting the Lord’s presence and power and acting as if everything were up to him. Moses presented himself as if he were a pagan magician with the ability to manipulate the gods to do his bidding. . .

In setting himself up as judge and deliverer of the people, Moses was demonstrating that he too had failed to learn from the past. That same self-exalting attitude was exactly what he had demonstrated when he first recognized the plight of his people when he was living as a prince in Pharaoh’s court. At that time, Moses saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, and he intervened and killed the Egyptian (**Exodus 2:11, 12**). The next day he saw two of his fellow Israelites fighting and tried to rebuke the one who was in the wrong. The man’s response was, “*Who made you a prince and a judge over us?*”

(**Exodus 2:14**). In other words, as a youth in Egypt Moses had been trying to judge and deliver his people in his own strength without a commission from the Lord. That attempt had ended in abject failure. Now, many years later, Moses had reverted once again to that old pattern of self-trust, judging the people in his own wisdom and trying to deliver them through his own acts, with similar results.

c. (:11) Finishes with Costly Rebellion

“Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.”

Gordon Wenham: Faith is the correct response to God’s word, whether it is a word of promise or a word of command. **Psalm 119:66** can say *‘I believe in thy commandments’*. The opposite of faith is rebellion or disobedience (e.g. **Deut. 9:23; 2 Kgs 17:14**). Thus Moses’ failure to carry out the Lord’s instructions precisely was as much an act of unbelief as the people’s failure to trust God’s promises instead of the spies’ pessimistic reports (**Num. 14:11**). Both were punished by exclusion from the land of promise. Because Aaron helped Moses (**8, 10**), he received the same sentence (**12**).

Moses’ unbelief was compounded by his anger, expressed in his remarks to the people (**10**), *‘he spoke words that were rash’* (**Ps. 106:33**), and by his striking the rock twice (**11**). **De Vaulx** suggests that there was an element of sacrilege in striking the rock, for it symbolized God. The people were gathered in a solemn assembly (**10**) before it as though before the ark or tent of meeting, and Moses was told to speak to it (**8, neb**). An additional argument in favour of this suggestion is that elsewhere God is often likened to a rock (e.g. **Pss. 18:2; 31:3; 42:9**, etc.). This understanding of the rock closely corresponds to that of the targums, and of Paul, who says *‘they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ’* (**1 Cor. 10:4**).

In disobeying instructions and showing no respect for the symbol of God’s presence, Moses failed to sanctify God; that means he did not acknowledge publicly his purity and unapproachability. When unholy men approach God, he shows himself holy by immediate or delayed judgment (**13**; cf. **Lev. 10:3**). Whereas Aaron’s sons died on the spot for offering incense that was not commanded, Moses and Aaron received a lighter sentence: they would not be allowed to lead the people into the land which I have given them (**12**). Nevertheless, this was enough to vindicate God’s holiness (**13**). This last phrase he showed himself holy (*wayyiqqādēš*) is evidently a play on the word Kadesh (*qādēš*, ‘holy person’ or ‘holy place’), in the vicinity of which this episode took place.

Raymond Brown: they misused God’s gifts. Moses and Aaron were equipped by the Lord with two specific gifts: **leadership** and **communication**. Here, they misused the gift of **leadership**. As the Lord’s servants, they were meant to be models of submissive obedience. The people expected them to do everything just as he commanded. In the teaching of Numbers, nothing is more important than obeying what God says, and here was Moses at the end of his life failing to do exactly what he was told. In that moment,

this great and gifted leader misused his gift of leadership and did what he wanted rather than what God demanded.

They also misused the gift of **communication**. Both men had spoken powerfully for God throughout their lifetime, and the great things the Lord said to them are preserved for us in Scripture. That day, at the rock face, Moses used the gift of speech to harangue the people rather than to exalt the Lord. ‘Instead of making the occasion a joyful manifestation of God’s effortless control over nature, they had turned it into a scene of bitter denunciation.’ The heedless crowd deserved to be called rebels, but that was not what the Lord wanted them to hear that day. A visible display of his astonishing mercy was spoiled by the angry rebuke of a self-willed speaker.

Wiersbe: The remarkable thing is that God gave the water, even though Moses’ attitudes and actions were all wrong! . . . This account should warn us against building our theology on events instead of on Scripture. The fact that God meets a need or blesses a ministry is no proof that the people involved are necessarily obeying the Lord in the way they minister.

C. (:12-13) Judgment by the Lord to Exalt His Holiness

1. (:12) Severe Curse of Falling Short of Entering the Promised Land

a. Disbelief is the Root Problem

*“But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron,
‘Because you have not believed Me,
to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel,’”*

b. Disqualification is the Tragic Result

*“therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land
which I have given them.”*

2. (:13) Sad Commentary

a. Place of Contention – Provoking Moses to Sin While Contending with the Lord

*“Those were the waters of Meribah,
because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD,”*

b. Proof of Holiness – Providing Life-Giving Water While Protecting His Reputation

“and He proved Himself holy among them.”

Timothy Ashley: Yahweh showed his own holiness (thus the reflexive verb)—his separateness, power, in short, everything that made him God—in two ways. First, he showed it by giving water to his thirsty people and their animals. Second, he judged the sin of his trusted leaders Moses and Aaron. In doing so, he showed that everyone must fulfill his commandments, even (especially!) his leaders.

II. (:14-22) EDOM REFUSES PASSAGE

A. (:14-17) Diplomatic Entreaty by Moses

1. (:14-15) Record of Historical Hardship

*“From Kadesh Moses then sent messengers to the king of Edom:
Thus your brother Israel has said, ‘You know all the hardship that has
befallen us; 15 that our fathers went down to Egypt, and we stayed in
Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our fathers badly.’”*

Gordon Wenham: The request was couched in the form of a diplomatic letter that closely conformed to the conventions of oriental scribal practice, known from the archives of Mari, Babylon, Alalakh and El-Amarna. It consists of several standard parts. First, a mention of the recipient, King of Edom (14). Second, the formula *Thus says*. Third, a mention of the sender Israel and his rank, *Your brother*; ‘your servant’ is the more common phrase in diplomatic correspondence, but here a different phrase was preferred. Fourth, there is mention of Israel’s present predicament and their motives in making their request (15). Finally, the request itself (17).

Timothy Ashley: the *misfortune* (*hattelā’â*) -- The root meaning of the word is “weariness,” hence “that which wears one out.” In **Exod. 18:8** the word refers to hardships suffered between Egypt and Sinai, in **Neh. 9:32** to hardships suffered in the history of Israel. In **Lam. 3:5** the word refers to the ignominy of the defeat of Jerusalem in 587/86 and is paralleled to “bitterness” or “venom” (*rō’s*).

Ronald Allen: Moses believes that the experiences of his people were well known to the other nations of the region. He says to the king of Edom, through his messengers, “*You know*” (v. 14). This is a part of a significant issue in the story of the Exodus, that the saving work of the Lord was not done in a vacuum or in a hiding place. The nations round about were expected to understand something of what had happened, that it was the Lord who had brought deliverance for his people.

2. (:16a) Recognition of Divine Deliverance

*“But when we cried out to the LORD,
He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt;”*

3. (:16b-17) Request for Uncontested Passage

a. (:16b) Makes Sense Logistically

*“now behold, we are at Kadesh,
a town on the edge of your territory.”*

b. (:17) Makes Sense from a Threat Assessment

*“Please let us pass through your land. We shall not pass through
field or through vineyard; we shall not even drink water from a
well. We shall go along the king’s highway, not turning to the
right or left, until we pass through your territory.”*

Timothy Ashley: These verses contain the actual request for passage, based on all that has gone before, and Edom's reply. It is interesting that the request does not divulge why the Israelites need passage through Edom, or their final destination. The pledge is that the Israelites will not go through Edom like a conquering army, much less like marauding bandits. Rather, they will act circumspectly by staying on the road. Of course, this is the language of diplomacy. The large number of Hebrews could not hope to cross through Edomite territory in one day, and one wonders where they planned to stay, what provisions they were to eat, etc. Whatever the answer to these questions, the gist of the message was that Israel will not be a burden on Edom.

B. (:18-20) Rejection by Edom

1. (:18) Initial Rejection Backed by Threat of the Sword

“Edom, however, said to him, ‘You shall not pass through us, lest I come out with the sword against you.’”

2. (:19) Second Appeal Sweetened with Assurance of Payment

“Again, the sons of Israel said to him, ‘We shall go up by the highway, and if I and my livestock do drink any of your water, then I will pay its price. Let me only pass through on my feet, nothing else.’”

3. (:20) Final Rejection Backed by Show of Force

“But he said, ‘You shall not pass through. And Edom came out against him with a heavy force, and with a strong hand.’”

Raymond Brown: Edom's heartless resistance to Israel's plea went down in history as a cruel rejection of God's people. This godless refusal of a compassionate opportunity carries its own warning; present selfishness invites future judgment (**24:18–19**). The king's callous words (*‘we will ... attack you with the sword’*) came home centuries later.

C. (:21-22) Rerouting of the Journey

1. (:21) Acceptance of Rejection

“Thus Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through his territory; so Israel turned away from him.”

Peter Wallace: So now they prepare to go around Edom (a long 90 miles to the south and then again around the southern and eastern borders of Edom). In other words, instead of 20 miles across Edom, they will now need to go **200 miles** around Edom!

2. (:22) Arrival at Mount Hor

“Now when they set out from Kadesh, the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor.”

(:23-29) EPILOGUE – DEATH OF AARON MARKS THE TRANSITION FROM THE GENERATION OF DEATH TO THE GENERATION OF PROMISE

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying,”

A. (:24) Pronouncement of Judgment on Aaron

“Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, because you rebelled against My command at the waters of Meribah.”

Gordon Wenham: *Gathered to his people.* This is the usual phrase to describe the death of a righteous man in a ripe old age. It is used of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and Moses (**Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Num. 31:2**). By contrast it is a fearful mark of divine judgment to be left unburied and not *‘be gathered’* (**Jer. 8:2; 25:33; Ezek. 29:5**). But the phrase is more than a figure of speech: it describes a central Old Testament conviction about life after death, that in Sheol, the place of the dead, people will be reunited with other members of their family. As David said when Bathsheba’s baby died, *‘I shall go to him, but he will not return to me’* (2 Sam. 12:23). Thus, though both Aaron and Moses die outside the promised land, because of their sin at Meribah, that is the limit of their punishment. In death they are on a par with the patriarchs and other saints of the old covenant.

B. (:25-28) Transition in Leadership from Aaron to Eleazar

1. (:25-26) Preparation for the Death of Aaron

“Take Aaron and his son Eleazar, and bring them up to Mount Hor; 26 and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar. So Aaron will be gathered to his people, and will die there.”

Dennis Cole: This was a momentous and emotional occasion for the nation and for Eleazar as they observed from a distance the departure of their first great high priest, the preeminent mediator of the sacral life of the nation in its relationship to Yahweh their God. For Eleazar it was no doubt a moment filled with emotional upheaval, a literal and metaphorical mountaintop experience in being inaugurated as the new high priest; but on the other hand it was a familial nadir, since his honorable father was about to die. The old era was passing; the generation was nearly gone that had witnessed the numerous miracles of God in Egypt, in the Exodus, at the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, and all along the journey through the wilderness. A new generation of leadership was taking the reins over the nation and under God, and prospects of the new life in the Promised Land were looming ever nearer.

2. (:27-28) Passing of Moses and Transfer of Authority to Eleazar

“So Moses did just as the LORD had commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. 28 And after Moses had stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar, Aaron

died there on the mountain top. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain.”

Gordon Wenham: The retirement of Aaron as high priest was a moment of vital significance in the life of Israel which had to be symbolized in the ritual stripping of Aaron’s high-priestly vestments and the investiture of his son, Eleazar. The high priest was the supreme mediator between God and Israel: the dignity of his office was expressed in the magnificence of his vestments. In a real sense the life of the nation was contingent on his carrying out his duties faithfully. Thus the death of a high priest marked the end of an era, and **Numbers 35** implies it made atonement for some sins.

Raymond Brown: As Eleazar came down from the mountain, he was dressed in the garments of Israel’s high priest. The waiting community knew that, although they were under different spiritual leadership, the same ideals were guaranteed. God had made provision for the continuance of his people’s spiritual life by announcing that the priests’ responsibilities were to be shouldered by Aaron’s sons. Here was further visible evidence of the dependability of God’s word and his pledge to stay with his people forever. Israel’s circumstances would change and the context of their service vary enormously over the centuries, but obedient people would hand on his truth from one generation to another. The sight of Aaron’s appointed successor was further visible evidence of God’s unchanging provision, sovereign purposes and continuing presence. Only Aaron had left them, not God.

C. (:29) Mourning of the People

“And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had died, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.”

Timothy Ashley: This is the same mourning period as for Moses (**Deut. 34:8**). The normal time for mourning is seven days (e.g., **Gen. 50:10; 1 Chr. 10:12; cf. Job 2:13**). The prolongation of mourning shows the importance of the one who has died and the importance of the loss to Israel.

Wiersbe: Victorious Christian service, like the victorious Christian life, is a series of new beginnings. No matter what mistakes we’ve made, it’s always too soon to quit.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What can you learn about the need to “Finish Strong” from the challenges faced late in life by Miriam and Aaron and Moses?
- 2) How should a spiritual leader respond when faced with exasperation and frustration in ministry?

3) How would you characterize the sin committed by Moses in this text and when have you wrestled with similar temptations?

4) How should a transfer of leadership take place in Christian organizations?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Duguid: In essence, most of our sins boil down to a functional failure to believe God. In theory, we believe that God is our rock and our refuge; in practice, however, we often act as if God doesn't even exist. Why do we judge people and write them off as hopeless? It is because in practice we do not really believe that God can rescue and redeem them. Why do we get so angry and frustrated when our spouses and our families disappoint us? It is because we don't really believe that God is their judge, and we aren't willing to let their sanctification rest in the Lord's hands. Why are we so fearful for our own future? It is because we don't really believe that the Lord will deliver us at the critical moment. Why are we so angry with God at the way our lives have turned out? It is because we don't believe he has our best interests at heart or that there is more to life than what we see around us in this world. We are condemned by our failure to believe in the Lord as rebels against his goodness, just like Moses and Aaron and an entire generation of the ancient Israelites. . .

In the midst of the death and disgrace that so dominate **Numbers 20**, it would be easy to overlook the positive signs of the Lord's grace that it contains. Even though Moses and Aaron sinned in carrying out the Lord's command and received a curse, the Lord nonetheless granted his rebellious people the flow of water that they needed. Even though Moses would not lead the people into the land, yet the Lord's promise to grant the land to them still stood, and he would raise up Joshua to take Moses' place. Even though Aaron was now dead, the next generation was ready to take up his priestly work through his son, Eleazar. In fact, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron in this chapter in some ways mark the beginning of a generational transition. Even though the definitive turning point of the census of the next generation is still six chapters away, from the beginning of Numbers 21 things started to look up for Israel. The Lord is not only far more gracious than we believe him to be—he is far more gracious than we deserve.

Peter Wallace: From Kadesh to Hor: Death, Grumbling, Disobedience, Resistance, and Death

And at the center of our story tonight is the rebellion of Moses. And the rebellion of Moses in verses 10-13 is couched in the language of the great rebellion. "*You did not believe in me*" (v12) – this is what God said to Israel in **14:11**. At the heart of Israel's great rebellion was Israel's **lack of faith**. And at the heart of Moses' disobedience is lack of faith. So let's pay attention to this as we go through **Numbers 20** – so that we can learn from our fathers not to have a stubborn, unbelieving heart. . .

This is what unbelief and ingratitude does. **Unbelief** leads you away from the land of blessing into a barren desert. If Israel had believed God and followed Moses, then they would (by now) have taken possession of the Promised Land. They would have all sorts of good things! And **ingratitude** leads you to blame others for your situation. A thankful heart would have blessed Moses for his continual care for Israel – but Israel does not have a thankful heart!

Maybe you've wondered: why did God punish Moses so severely? Moses fails once – and God says that he will never enter the land! There's a simple reason for this. Moses is the man of the law. As James says, "*whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*" (**James 2:10**) God wants Israel to see that no one is righteous by the works of the law – not even Moses! The law cannot bring you into the land! But then again, the law was never designed to bring you into the land! The land is yours because God promised to Abraham.

David Thompson:

ISRAEL FACES SOME DIFFICULT SITUATIONS AND LOSES TWO IMPORTANT AND LOVED LEADERS AND SHOULD LEARN THAT GOD AND HIS WORD SHOULD ALWAYS BE TRUSTED AND STRICTLY OBEYED.

According to **verse 7**, the LORD spoke to Moses and in **verse 8** He gave him six mandates:

- 1) Get your staff. **20:8a**–There is a debate as to whether this is Moses' staff or Aaron's budding staff that was usually kept in the Ark of the Covenant box. We think it was Moses' staff. This was the same staff Moses used to perform miracles in Egypt.
- 2) Get your brother Aaron. **20:8b**
- 3) Assemble the congregation. **20:8c**
- 4) Speak to the rock before their eyes. **20:8d**
- 5) Water will pour out of the rock. **20:8e**
- 6) Let the people and their beasts drink. **20:8f**

Now Moses was a man given to obeying God. There are six responses to what God told Moses and a couple of them aren't good:

(Response #1) - Moses took the staff before the Lord. **20:9**

(Response #2) - Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock. **20:10a**

(Response #3) - Moses spoke to the people and identified them as rebels. **20:10b**
The word "*rebel*" (*mara*) means one who is defiant against God. Moses is actually making himself the judge here and the provider. God did not tell Moses to use this language against the people, He told him to speak to the rock.

(Response #4) - Moses questions whether or not he and Aaron should bring forth water. **20:10c** Here is a problem. It was not Moses and Aaron who could do this. It was God. Rather than using this as a basis for glorifying God, Moses put the emphasis on them.

(Response #5) - Moses took his staff and struck the rock twice and water poured

out. **20:11a** God did not tell Moses to strike the rock and Moses did it twice.
(Response #6) - The people and their beasts drank. **20:11b**

Now we want to make a very important observation from this. Moses represents the O.T. law. If you miss one little commandment or have one little lapse or moment of disobedience, you are condemned and heading to death. This text should cause every human to flee to Jesus Christ by faith.

J. Ligon Duncan: Just Another Day In the Wilderness:

- **A Sister Dies,**
- **a Rock is Struck, the Water Flows,**
- **the Edomites Refuse,**
- **and a Brother Is Gathered to His People**

Here in the midst of the arduous demands of leading this massive army of the people of God through the wilderness, Moses first suffers close family bereavement in the loss of his sister. On the heels of that, without an opportunity to catch his breath, he faces fierce opposition and complaints from the people of God. This fills his spirit with an intense frustration with their rebellious spirit. He loses his temper and, in an uncharacteristic display of public disrespect for the Almighty God, he commits a sin that causes him to forfeit the entrance into the Promised Land — the thing for which he has lived for forty years. And then his brother dies. And God tells Moses before his brother dies that he is going to announce to his brother that he is going to die, and he is going to die for the sin that he and Moses committed at Meribah. Have you ever had one of those days? I'm not sure if any of us has ever seen the like of the trials of this man Moses. And this great chapter, **Numbers 20**, tells his story.

v. 1 -- The message is simply this: Miriam's not going into the land shows us the precious privilege of the Promised Land is no small thing. It comes at no small price, and it is a thing of no small significance. And even as God had said that none of this generation would enter this land, even Miriam wouldn't enter the land. The exactness of God's judgment is crystal clear in the death of Miriam.

vv. 2-13 -- Now my friends, you realize you now have Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, the three most significant people in Israel in this period of time, are not going in to the Promised Land. My friends, the death sentence pronounced on Moses and Aaron, and the death of Miriam that is carried out in **verse 1**, lets you know that no one is righteous enough to earn the Promised Land. If Moses and Aaron and Miriam have fallen short of the glory of God, have failed the standards of righteousness of God, no one in Israel can go into that land.

vv. 14-21 -- God's word had been to Abram all the way back in **Genesis 12** that "*You have been made for a blessing to the nations, but those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you I will curse.*" This refusal would dog the relations between Israel and Edom for the rest of the existence of those nations.

vv. 22-29 -- the language “*gathered to your people*” is language that indicates that God accepts Aaron despite his sin, and despite the fact that he is not going to enter into the Promised Land. He accepts him as His people. What a comforting word that would have been for Moses’ heart and Aaron’s heart, in a dark, dark time.

And of course, in the end it won’t be Miriam or Aaron or Moses who will take the children of Israel across the Trans-Jordan, over the Jordan and into the Promised Land. It will be a young man named *Yeshua*. For the author of Hebrews, in **Hebrews 4**, says that it is only Jesus who will give His people rest. Not even Moses; only Jesus.

Wiersbe: vv. 10-11 – It was a sad demonstration of hostility by the meekest man on the earth (**12:3**). . . Abraham failed in his strength, which was his faith. David’s strength was his integrity, and that’s where he failed; Peter’s strength was his courage, yet he wilted before the question of a young girl. Satan knows how to turn strength into weakness, but the Lord can turn weakness into strength.

David Silversides: Pursuing Holiness – A Lifelong Calling

40 year curse for unbelief – generation dying off in the wilderness;

They have now returned to the wilderness of Zin;

Events prior to the entering into the Promised Land

1. Perfected in Holiness at Last -- (vs. 1) – Death of Miriam

Generation was not totally devoid of faith; just as those who entered the Promised Land were not all of genuine faith; separation of the wheat and the tares awaits the last days; but predominantly an unbelieving generation that perished in the wilderness; Moses, Miriam and Aaron rebuked and disciplined for showing signs of unbelief but does not mean they were devoid of true faith;

12:1 – spoke against Moses, demonstrating great pride

Looking for blessedness in another world;

2. The Relentless Battle with Unbelief -- (vs. 2-5)

You would have thought the nation would have learned their lesson by now; but not so.

a. Every sin includes sin of unbelief.

Arguing with Moses and Aaron and speaking as if the Lord did not exist; words are reckless in the extreme; envied those who died in the wilderness;

b. The battle with sin does not cease until we gasp our last breath.

3. The best can be dragged down -- (vv. 6-12)

vs. 9 – Moses and Aaron forget their place; Moses gave way to exasperation and frustration and annoyance instead of simply doing what the Lord had required and trusting the Lord as the Rock of salvation; indulges a sinful anger as if sick and tired of the people because of their treatment of him; fails to set apart the Lord before the eyes of the people; does not emphasize that the Lord’s glory and honor is involved and is what matters; only a holy indignation on behalf of the Lord’s glory is permissible in leaders; responding

instead to what he perceived they had done to him; intruded his own offended self

4. The Lord will not give His glory to another – people dragged Moses down into sin -- (vv. 12-13)

5. The Lord chastens the church by means of their enemies -- (vv. 14-20)
Using Edom to correct and chastize and do good for his own people

6. Hastened on to glory – (vv. 23-29)

Aaron accepted with meekness that his appointed time for death had come.
Sovereignty of God over death by whatever means He determines.

Lessons:

Seek grace not only to run well, but to finish well; Moses and Aaron were old men when they failed so miserably despite being so exemplary for so many years. Satan seeks to mar their whole testimony.

Provoke one another to love and good works; not to sin as the people provoked Moses.

God will not give His glory to another so we need a God-glorifying humility in all of our work and witness. Not unto us, but to Thy name give glory.

The Lord is with us in our humiliations as He was with Israel when unjustly treated by Edom. The Lord is good and He does good.

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TEXT: Numbers 21:1-20

TITLE: CELEBRATING SALVATION

BIG IDEA:

DESPITE ONGOING GRUMBLING AND COMPLAINING, THE LORD'S PEOPLE EXPERIENCE HIS GRACIOUS SALVATION

INTRODUCTION:

Our spiritual journey involves a myriad of different experiences. Sometimes the Lord graciously provides victory where previously we had suffered defeat. All of us need to respond in faith to the Lord's exclusive provision of salvation when we are under penalty of judgment. Sometimes our times of frustration and deprivation are met with abundant blessing and provision from the Lord. But we need to turn away from grumbling and complaining; we need to repent when we have sinned; we need to look to the Lord in faith; we need to celebrate our gracious salvation.

Peter Wallace: Tonight's story reminds us that whenever God takes you down a long and difficult road, there is refreshment at the end – there is victory – there is peace (*shalom*) for those who repent. Sometimes the road can be 40 years long. Sometimes it can take 40 years until you learn your lesson – and repent! But – yes, there is a warning here – not everyone repents! And so as we go through our passage tonight, let us learn to repent and believe the gospel!

Ronald Allen: It is not unusual in Scripture, or in our own lives, to have a story of defeat follow quickly on a story of victory. The author of Numbers places two such contrasting stories side-by-side in this chapter, perhaps to show the reader that while progress was being made toward dependence on the Lord, there was still a long way to go for these desert people! Right on the heels of the story of Israel's great victory over the Canaanites of the Negev, they fall on their own swords on the issue of food again in the rebellion that leads to the story of the bronze serpent.

I. (:1-3) SALVATION FROM ENEMIES IN PLACE OF PREVIOUS DEFEAT – PROMISE TO DESTROY THE CANAANITES AT HORMAH

A. (:1) Capture of Some Israelites

1. Identification of the Enemy

“When the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who lived in the Negev,”

Gordon Wenham: This brief notice records Israel's first victory over the Canaanites and heralds the dawn of a new era. The long delay in the fulfilment of the promises is nearly over. It was at Hormah that an abortive attempt was made to enter Canaan after the spies returned from their mission (**14:45**). It was there nearly forty years later that they triumphed for the first time, a pledge of the conquest of the land that was soon to begin (cf. **Eph. 1:13–14**).

2. Intelligence Gleaned by the Enemy

“heard that Israel was coming by the way of Atharim,”

3. Initiative by the Enemy to Capture Some Israelites

“then he fought against Israel, and took some of them captive.”

B. (:2) Commitment to Destroy the Enemy

“So Israel made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If Thou wilt indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.’”

Raymond Brown: They were prayerful, resolute . . . and encouraged. This initial victory was won at the place of earlier defeat. The Lord was assuring them that, in coming days, things would be different. When the Lord gave the Canaanites over to them (3) it was an immense boost to their morale. This first conquest became the precursor of later triumphs (21:21–35). On the threshold of Canaan, the Lord was assuring them that, by his grace and in his power, life could be different.

Timothy Ashley: The Hiphil of *hāram*, “to put to the ban,” means to give the conquered people (and things) to Yahweh by destroying them, thus not claiming the spoils of victory for themselves, but for God, the real victor (cf. **Deut. 7:1–2; 20:17; Josh. 6:17, 21;** etc.).

C. (:3) Conclusion of the Matter

1. Deliverance by the Lord

*“and the LORD heard the voice of Israel,
and delivered up the Canaanites;”*

Constable: This was the Israelites’ first victory over the Canaanites, and it was undoubtedly a great confidence builder for them. It came after the Israelites vowed to obey God completely by exterminating these Canaanites if He would give them victory as He had promised. In this vow the Israelites simply promised to obey God. The conquest of Canaan must have seemed more certain to the Israelites now than ever before.

2. Destruction by the Israelites

*“then they utterly destroyed them and their cities.
Thus the name of the place was called Hormah.”*

Hormah = the ban place; to devote to destruction

Gordon Wenham: Deuteronomy justifies this treatment of the Canaanites as a preventive against apostasy (7:4). Brutal as it seems to us, it is of a piece with the rest of Israel’s penal code, which insists on the death penalty for a wide range of religious offences. Fidelity to the Lord and the purity of the faith ranked highest of the values in Israel’s ethical and religious system.

Ronald Allen: Here was the first occasion for a military operation by the new generation. The text emphasizes several things:

- (1) that the king of Arad was a Canaanite (**vv. 1, 3**);
- (2) that he deliberately provoked an attack on Israel, including the taking of hostages; and
- (3) that, unlike their rebellious fathers (**14:41-45**), the people of Israel fought this time under the blessing and empowerment of the Lord (**v. 3**).

II. (:4-9) SALVATION FROM THE JUDGMENT OF DEATH – PICTURE OF SALVATION = FIERY SERPENT ON A STANDARD

A. (:4) Frustration of the People Builds

1. Difficult Journey

“Then they set out from Mount Hor by the way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom;”

2. Difficult People

“and the people became impatient because of the journey.”

Literally - "the soul of the people was short"

Raymond Brown: The terrain was difficult. Lawrence of Arabia described its ‘hopelessness and sadness, deeper than all the open deserts we had crossed ... there was something sinister, something actively evil in this snake-devoted Sirhan, proliferant of salt water, barren palms, and bushes which served neither for grazing nor for firewood’. In ancient times, the area was notorious for its poisonous snakes. During its campaign to Egypt, Esarhaddon’s army had to deal with its ‘two-headed serpents whose attack spelled death’ . . .

The people were irritable and fractious, depressed at having to make such a long trek round Edomite territory. Physically exhausted and emotionally stressed, they became spiritually arid. Frustrated and weary, it was not long before they began to repeat their fault-finding recital of familiar complaints. There was little that was new except that, instead of pinning the blame on their leaders, they hurled their accusations in the face of the Lord: they spoke against God and against Moses (**5**). Their anger was expressed in resentment about their preferable past, gloomy future and frugal present.

Ronald Allen: The people had to detour because of the intransigent attitude of Edom. Each step they made south and east, rather than north and west, seemed to be an unbearable back-tracking. They rejoined the road to the Sea of Reeds to make a broad circuit around Edom. Finally, it got to them again. They had been so very near the land and had even tasted the sweet wine of victory. But now they were wandering again, and in their wanderings they seemed to be as far away from “real” food as ever. . .

There is a pattern to complaining; it is habit forming. The tendency among people is to go beyond where one left off the last time, to become ever more egregious, ever more outspoken. Rarely does a complaining person become milder in his complaints. Finally, complaining becomes self-destructive.

B. (:5) Familiar Complaint Lodged

“And the people spoke against God and Moses”

1. Resentment of the Lord’s Wisdom and Guidance

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt,”

2. Fear of the Worst Possible Outcome

“to die in the wilderness?”

3. Magnifying Challenges

“For there is no food and no water,”

4. Ingratitude

“and we loathe this miserable food.”

Gordon Wenham: This is the last recorded occasion that Israel grumbled about their food (cf. **11:4ff.; Exod. 16**) and yearned for the delicacies of Egypt. They describe the manna as worthless food. The term worthless (*qēlōqēl*) is found only here and may be derived from *qillēl*, to ‘despise’ or *qal*, ‘light’, hence the av rendering. Whichever translation is preferred, it is a disparaging comment on the bread of heaven (**Pss. 78:24–25; 105:40; cf. John 6:31**). As on the previous occasion, it provoked God’s anger (cf. **11:33**), this time in the form of fiery serpents, whose bite was lethal. It seems likely that the inflammation caused by this bite prompted them to be called fiery.

Raymond Brown: A contemporary psychotherapist has spoken about the basic problems that cause people to seek help, identifying them as ‘the fearsome foursome’. All four make their appearance in this narrative: **resentment** (*‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt?’*), **fear** (*‘to die in the desert’*), **self-absorption** (*‘we detest this miserable food!’*) and **guilt** (*‘We sinned when we spoke against the LORD’*). At the heart of the people’s discontent was a series of conspicuous spiritual defects.

First, they did not acknowledge his **power**. Their deliverance from Egypt uniquely demonstrated his omnipotence and now they regretted it ever happened. How could anyone witness the astonishing miracle at the Red Sea and not believe that the Lord was on their side? Even in those days they whined that they were about to die in the desert, though God had better things in store for them.

Secondly, they did not appreciate his **generosity**. Ever since that dramatic escape from the tyranny of their oppressors, the Lord had fed them with this heaven-sent gift. The manna had sustained Israel’s people over the past four decades. Could they not thank

him for its miraculous supply rather than denigrate its dietary limitations? Ingratitude has no place among believers; it is pagans who do not give thanks, not Christians.

Thirdly, they did not recognize his **mercy**. He had fed them with manna on days when they least deserved it. It was not given to them as a reward for faithfulness; its daily supply had fallen gently during their times of strident rebellion and sick apostasy as well as in periods of grateful contentment.

Fourthly, they did not accept his **sovereignty**. It still irritated them that the older generation would not see the promised land, but repetitive complaining would not alter it. The Lord was keeping them out of Canaan, not in order to be vindictive, but to prepare a better community for the tough days that lay ahead. Crowds of persistent complainers would hardly make a competent invasion force. Life does not always give us exactly what we want, and for most of us there are inevitable disappointments. When we find ourselves in circumstances we are powerless to change, it hardly helps to turn life into an incessant dirge.

Finally, they did not trust his **word**. The desert community were more adept at itemizing their grievances than at counting their blessings. The Lord had promised to meet their needs, and it was iniquitous to forget his faithfulness, despise his care and deny his providence. They were his greatly loved children, a truth treasured by their later prophets, and he would not allow anything to befall them that was outside his sovereign will.

C. (:6) Fiery Serpents Dispatched for Judgment

“And the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.”

Wiersbe: In the past, when Israel had sinned, the glory of the Lord would usually appear and the judgment of the Lord would follow. But this time, there was no warning. The judgment came immediately as the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people. They had rejected God’s gift of the life and health from heaven, so God sent them suffering and death from the earth, and many of the people died.

D. (:7) Facing Their Sins – Repentance and Intercession

1. Repentance by the People

“So the people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned, because we have spoken against the LORD and you;’”

Iain Duguid: Repentance is not simply a matter of recognizing and bemoaning what great sinners we are. As long as we are doing that, our eyes are still fixed on ourselves. Repentance is turning our heart to Christ in the midst of recognizing our own sin and fixing our eyes once again on the remedy for that sin, offered to us in the gospel. Repentance is catching ourselves when we have grumbled over some challenge to our comfort or our sense of being in control of our lives or our acceptance by the in-crowd and deliberately turning our face afresh toward Jesus. Repentance is picking ourselves

up after we have sought comfort in some earthly substitute for God, whether food or lustful thoughts or shopping or gossip or an angry outburst, and saying to ourselves, “This is not my comfort. My only refuge is Jesus.” The life of faith is a life of repentance that is constantly turning away from sin and turning toward Jesus.

Peter Wallace: What has been missing from the last 6 rebellions? **Repentance!** Moses and Aaron have interceded for Israel – but Israel never confessed their sin! Israel never repented! Now Israel repents. This is a great model of repentance: “*We have sinned.*” There are no excuses offered – just an acknowledgement of guilt. And then the sin is clearly identified: “*we have spoken against the LORD and against you.*” Hey, this is exciting! Israel has learned their lesson! Brothers and sisters, do you realize how exciting this is? The death of Aaron symbolized the transition – but here we have the substance of the change! Without repentance the cycles of sin and death will just go on forever! Own up to your sin.

2. Intercession by Moses

*“intercede with the LORD,
that He may remove the serpents from us.
And Moses interceded for the people.”*

E. (:8-9) Fiery Serpent Displayed for Salvation

1. (:8) Provision for Salvation

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent,
and set it on a standard; and it shall come about,
that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he shall live.’”*

Roy Gane: The bronze snake, however, is appointed by God, who alone is capable of healing his people. So although it is symbolic, it is not magical. Nor is it an offering to the Lord. Yet it does function like the Philistine models in the sense of acknowledging that a specific punishment has come from the Lord because of sin against him. Thus, to confront the serpent sculpture is to confront one’s own sin and its result. It is the spiritual equivalent of looking in the mirror. That unspoken confession is all it takes to live. . .

It is deeply disturbing that Jesus identified himself with Moses’ snake, which symbolized sin and death. We would much prefer to think of him as the innocent “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (**John 1:29**). The “snake” idea is even more repulsive when we remember the Genesis story of how a satanic serpent introduced sin and death into the world by instigating the disobedience of Eve and Adam (**Gen. 3**; cf. **Rev. 12:9**). However, rather than gently backing off the identification of Christ with sin, Paul jarringly rams it home: “*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (**2 Cor. 5:21**).

Ronald Allen: Now we think again of the enormity of what Moses was asked to do, of the taboos he was asked to break. . . The people had called the bread of heaven

detestable. Moses is commanded of God to make an image of something truly detestable in their culture and to hold that high on a pole as their only means of deliverance from disease. Only those who looked at the image of the snake would survive the venom that coursed through their bodies. This is an extraordinary act of cultural shock, an exceptionally daring use of potent symbols. As the people had transformed in their own thinking the gracious bread of heaven into detestable food, so the Lord transforms a symbol of death into a source of life and deliverance. The rejection of God's grace brings a symbol of death. The intervention of God's grace brings a source of life.

S. Lewis Johnson: The remedy is a supernatural remedy because a brazen serpent cannot heal. It is sufficient for all, everyone who looks is healed; it is infallible, you do not have to look twice, you have to look once. You know, do not read any one who said I looked, but I was not healed, he looked and he was. God is not treating us all fairly. It was infallible, it was enduring. In fact, this serpent existed on into the time of Hezekiah. We know it was unique. It was the only way in which you could be healed and it was personal.

2. (:9) Appropriation of Salvation

*“And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard;
and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man,
when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.”*

Gordon Wenham: Men dying in sin are saved by the dead body of a man suspended on the cross. Just as physical contact was impossible between those bitten by snakes and the copper snake, so sinners are unable to touch the life-giving body of Christ. Yet in both situations the sufferers must appropriate God's healing power themselves: by looking at the copper snake or '*believing in the Son of man*' (**John 3:15**).

Ronald Allen: The **bread** is a picture of Jesus; as the Bread of Heaven he is the proper nourisher of his people. The **bronze snake** is a picture of Jesus, who became sin for us as he hung on that awful tree. The manna had to be eaten. The snake had to be seen. The commands of Scripture are for doing. The manna was no good if left to rot. The metal snake would not avail if none looked at it. **The manna and the snake are twin aspects of the grace of God.**

Peter Wallace: This bronze serpent remained a sign for hundreds of years. We are told that in Hezekiah's day it was finally broken, because the people of Israel were making offerings to it. This is a reminder to us that good things – even things that God himself appointed – can be turned to idolatry, and thus need to be destroyed.

III. (:10-20) SALVATION FROM DEPRIVATION IN THE WILDERNESS -- PROGRESSION IN THEIR JOURNEYS TO POSITION THE NATION FOR ENTERING THE PROMISED LAND

A. (:10-15) Series of Locations for Camping

1. (:10) Camping at Oboth

“Now the sons of Israel moved out and camped in Oboth.”

Gordon Wenham: The tempo of advance quickens as Israel approaches the promised land. Extracts from the travel log interspersed with fragments of old poems convey the sense of elation as the goal of their wanderings comes into sight. Their route took them east of the territory of Moab, which covered the fertile high ground on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea, through the drier area between Moab and the desert, the arid part of the Dead Sea valley.

It seems probable that the last section of the itinerary (14–20) anticipates the outcome of the battles with Sihon and Og described in verses 21–35, for it involved passing through the territory of the Amorites. This is confirmed by the fuller account in **Deuteronomy 2–3**. Again, it is impossible to locate precisely many of the places mentioned here, but the mention of Zered and Arnon, rivers which flow into the Dead Sea from the east, give a clue to their approximate locations.

Henry Morris: It is difficult to trace the various moves of the Israelites during their forty years in the wilderness. The itineraries in **Numbers 21** and **Numbers 33**, for example, seem impossible to correlate in any detail. It must be remembered, however, that the Israelite nation consisted of several million people plus all their cattle, horses and equipment. They must have been scattered over a large area of the wilderness in order to have pasturage for their flocks and herds. It is possible that much of the moving described in the Mosaic records refers mainly to moving the tabernacle and its attendants (along with Moses)--perhaps making a circuit among the various tribal encampments.

2. (:11) Camping at Iyeabarim

“And they journeyed from Oboth, and camped at Iyeabarim, in the wilderness which is opposite Moab, to the east.”

3. (:12) Camping in Wadi Zered

“From there they set out and camped in Wadi Zered.”

4. (:13-15) Camping at Arnon

a. (:13) Located Between Moab and the Amorites

“From there they journeyed and camped on the other side of the Arnon, which is in the wilderness that comes out of the border of the Amorites, for the Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites.”

b. (:14-15) Lore in the Book of the Wars of the Lord

“Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD, ‘Waheb in Suphah, And the wadis of the Arnon, 15 And the slope of the wadis That extends to the site of Ar, And leans to the border of Moab.’”

Raymond Brown: This next section, the last travelogue of the book, extends to the time when the Israelites reached their strategic destination prior to crossing the Jordan, the desert that faces Moab (11), the border of Moab (13), the valley in Moab (20) and, finally, *‘the plains of Moab ... across from Jericho’* (22:1). It ‘creates the impression of a determined and purposeful march toward the promised land.’ On their way through the Transjordan, the travelers recorded a series of changing experiences. Not all of their camping sites can be precisely located, but the purpose of the passage is more doctrinal than geographical. It offers a portrait of the Israelites’ dependence on God for continuing guidance, essential resources and military success.

Constable: The *"Book of the Wars of the Lord"* (Numbers 21:14) was a collection of songs that commemorated God’s glorious acts on behalf of the Israelites. Apparently Moses or one of his contemporaries wrote or edited it. The fragment of one of these songs that the writer included here (Numbers 21:14-15) describes the Arnon. The fact that Moses inserted this strophe reflects the joy that the Israelites felt on this occasion.

B. (:16-18a) Significance of Well at Beer

1. (:16) Provision of Water by the Lord

“And from there they continued to Beer, that is the well where the LORD said to Moses, ‘Assemble the people, that I may give them water.’”

2. (:17-18) Praise to the Lord via Commemorative Song

“Then Israel sang this song: ‘Spring up, O well! Sing to it! 18 The well, which the leaders sank, Which the nobles of the people dug, With the scepter and with their staffs.’”

Dennis Cole: With such a long history of complaining about the lack of water, the celebration of God’s granting of water by instruction to Moses marks another turning point in the narrative of God’s dealing with Israel. The recent occasion of Moses gathering the people to see God supply their need ended in judgment and despair for the prophet (20:2–13). Death was meted out to the last group who grumbled (21:5–6). Now Israel was given further incentive to continue toward the goal of the Promised Land.

Brueggemann: As Israel traveled on through Moab’s capital (21:15, 28) they came to a town named *“Well”* (21:16), where they sang of a well that princes had commissioned or dedicated with the symbols of their office (21:18). The narrative quotes a short bit of a song from The Book of the Wars of the Lord (21:14). Like The Book of Jashar (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18), this was probably an ancient book of popular songs celebrating Israel’s struggle to possess Canaan. This could have been a work song for men digging the well (Eissfeldt 1965:88) or celebrating its completion (Ashley 1993:413). For Israel it expressed their joy at God’s repeated provision of water (Exod 15:22–25; 17:1–7). If the ancients sang of a well in the sand, how much more fitting it is to sing of Jesus’ Spirit that springs up in our souls (John 7:37–39) and of drinking of Christ (1 Cor 10:4), never to thirst again (John 4:10–15).

C. (:18b-20) Series of Progressive Destinations

1. (:18b) To Mattanah

“And from the wilderness they continued to Mattanah,”

2. (:19a) To Nahaliel

“and from Mattanah to Nahaliel,”

3. (:19b) To Bamoth

“and from Nahaliel to Bamoth,”

4. (:20) To Pisgah

“and from Bamoth to the valley that is in the land of Moab, at the top of Pisgah which overlooks the wasteland.”

Peter Wallace: Verses 19-20 make clear that they have now arrived at the plains of Moab. Here they will remain for a few months until Moses dies, and Joshua leads them into the land. All the events of the last 15 chapters of Numbers – and the sermons of the book of Deuteronomy – happen here on the plains of Moab.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) When have you experienced victory in a place where formerly you had suffered a crushing defeat? Or when has a spiritual mountaintop experience been followed by a humiliating lapse into sin?
- 2) What parallels can you draw between the fiery serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness and the pathway to salvation by Jesus Christ being lifted up on the cross?
- 3) How do you answer objections by people that the gospel message is just too easy or too simple to be judged effective?
- 4) How can we express our praise to the Lord for the living water which He has so abundantly provided for us?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Iain Duguid: It was a sign that was full of meaning for the Israelites, who had only a few years earlier emerged from Egypt and were therefore well-versed in Egyptian symbolism. These serpents were a potent representation of the power of Egypt, to which they were apparently so eager to return. Snakes were well-known symbols of power and sovereignty in ancient Egypt, as the familiar image of a cobra on Pharaoh’s

crown reminds us. Having once been freed from Pharaoh, did they really want to be subject to the power of the serpent all over again?

Even more profoundly, though, the serpent (*nāḥāš*) is a symbol of the ultimate enemy of mankind, Satan himself. It was in the form of a serpent (*nāḥāš*) that Satan deceived our first ancestors and brought about the sin that caused us to be cast out of the garden into the desert of this fallen world. It was not the Lord who had brought them into the wilderness to die, as they alleged (v. 5). Their death was not due to his power failing to give them that which he had promised. On the contrary, death in the wilderness was the result of their own sin and that of their forefather, Adam. It was their refusal to submit to the Lord that led to bondage to Satan, who is the real hard taskmaster. . .

The serpent on the pole was not a magical cure for snakebite, however. On the contrary, it was a sign that worked by taking the Lord at his word through faith. The people were to look intently at the bronze serpent, putting their trust in the power of the Lord's victory over evil, and then they would be healed. It is not coincidental that the Lord chose this means of healing the people, for faith is the key marker of those who would enter the Promised Land. The unbelieving generation of their parents, including Moses and Aaron, were excluded from the land because of their unbelief (see **14:11; 20:12**). The judgment by the fiery serpents would similarly eliminate any from the new generation who were lacking in faith, for those who refused to look to the Lord through the bronze serpent would die. Only those who believed could enter the land, for only those who believed would live.

Grumbling was not the only experience that the new generation shared with their forefathers. They also experienced their fair share of camping and moving on, as **verses 10–20** show us. This lengthy travel itinerary may seem at first sight a waste of our time as well as theirs. Who really knows where “*Waheb in Suphah*” was (v. 14)? The commentators can only guess. More pertinently, why would anyone really care? Yet the travelogue of desert camps heightens our awareness of the experience of the new generation of traveling on and on while apparently going nowhere. That is the precise point of its inclusion. It shows us that the new generation proceeded onward through a succession of nowhere places in the wilderness around Moab just as their fathers had; yet it was precisely in these places that they learned of God's continuing faithfulness. There, in the middle of nowhere, they experienced the Lord's faithfulness in providing a well (**vv. 16, 17**), contradicting their earlier complaint that there was no water in the wilderness (v. 5). There in the middle of nowhere they also experienced the Lord's faithfulness in giving them victory in battle, as demonstrated in the reference to “*the Book of the Wars of the Lord*” (v. 14), along with the defeat of Sihon and Og, two of Israel's most archetypal enemies. These victories disproved their earlier claim that the Lord had brought them into the wilderness to die (v. 5).

What is more, it was there in the middle of nowhere that the people started to sing. The first generation had entered the wilderness with a song on their lips (**Exodus 15**), but that song soon died away, overwhelmed by the harsh realities of life and the growing unbelief of the people. Grumbling is irreconcilable with singing. Grumbling feels sorry

for itself, while singing delights in what God has given and what he has promised to give. It is therefore not coincidental that with the rise of the new generation and their healing for their sin, we see a new burst of song, which was the outward expression of their faith.⁸ When God's people sing, they confess that life is not merely an endless cycle of one barren campground after another, as it sometimes appears to be. Rather, they proclaim that God is faithful in the present to provide provision along the way and that he can be trusted to give ultimate victory. Singing is always an index marker of faith in the greater realities to come.

David Thompson:

EVEN IN THE MIDST OF ALL THE WONDERFUL THINGS GOD'S PEOPLE HAD EXPERIENCED, THEY WERE STILL REBELLING AND STILL DISOBEYING AND STILL SUFFERING THE CONSEQUENCES; BUT WHEN THEY FINALLY TURN FROM THEIR SIN, GOD BLESSES THEM.

vv. 1-3 -- This is an important point for any believer to see. As Israel got near the Promised Land, the warfare intensified. The closer we get to the ultimate blessings of God, the more intense the battle becomes. Satan does not want God's people victorious, so he will bring warfare difficulties and trials to try to prevent it. . .

vv. 4-9 -- Now this is profound because Jesus Christ will use this very story concerning Himself and the cross (John 3:14). All one needs to do to be saved is look at Jesus Christ on that cross to save. That is it. You do not have to promise anything. You do not have to do any works. You do not have to get involved in religion. What you must do is to look at that cross. One look by faith will save you (**John 3:14-16**). This is what this comes down to - you either look to Jesus Christ as your Savior because you know you are a sinner, or you look to something else that cannot save you. According to verse 9, Moses made the bronze serpent and put it on a pole and it was lifted up and any person who looked at it lived. . .

vv. 10-20 -- According to **verses 17-18**, Israel sang a song of thanks and joy to the Lord for the well and springs of water. Now we will admit this is a different attitude. What a transformation. They had been complaining and murmuring and now they are singing. They are actually thanking God and praising God. The people had done their part to produce the well and God had blessed their work. The Lord led them to the spot to dig, and out flowed water. To get God's blessings we must do what we can do.

According to verses 19-20, Israel traveled to Mattanah to Hanaliel, to Bamoth to the Moabite Valley at the top of Pisgah that overlooks the Promised Land. The Pisgah peak gives an excellent view of the wilderness areas on the north west, north and north east sides of the Dead Sea. This would be the place where Moses would see the land before he died.

Good things are starting to happen for Israel because she finally faced her sin.

J. Ligon Duncan: Snakebit

Now, let me say just in passing that this is yet another passage in which the Bible attests to its own truthfulness to me. Because at one level you might think surely Israel would have learned their lesson. I mean, how many times have they complained this complaint? Couldn't you give me some new material here, Israel? And yet when they do this, they're acting just like me. This passage speaks of me and my sin, and of you and of your sin, and we're never very creative in it. We go back to the same patterns over and over again. However patient and however gracious God is in His dealings with us, we repeat the same old cycles of sin over and over again. This passage speaks to me of the truthfulness of the Bible because it describes the sin, and the patterns and habits of sin in my own heart and life.

Well, there are four things that I want you to see tonight as we look through this great passage. The first is the gravity of Israel's sin (you'll see it in **verses 4 and 5**). The second thing is the just judgment of God (you'll see it in **verse 6**). The third thing is the response of the people of God to God's judgment (in **verse 7**); and then (in **verses 8 and 9**), the merciful provision of God. . .

vv. 4-5 – Gravity of Israel's Sin

Do you see five things that Israel does there?

- First, Israel becomes impatient.

- Secondly, notice how they profanely and disrespectfully and irreverently speak against God and Moses. Who do these people think they are? Moses is God's personally appointed mediator, and God is...well, He's God! He's the God who brought them out of Egypt. He's the God who parted the Red Sea. And they speak against Him, and they speak against Moses.

- And thirdly, specifically, they have the gall to call into question God's plan of redemption! Basically they accuse God of having a lousy plan. Now that takes some chutzpah!

- Fourthly, they doubt God's ability to provide for them in the wilderness: "*There's no food and water here!*" What's He been giving you, people? Through the rock, He's provided you water. Bread from heaven, He's provided you food to eat. He's brought quail so that you can have meat. "*There's no food and water here,*" they say. They doubt God's ability to provide for them in the wilderness.

- And, fifth, they ungratefully denigrate God's provision for them in the wilderness: "*We loathe this worthless food!*" You remember, my friends, that some of this food would be taken up before the children of Israel go into the land, and it will be put into the ark of the covenant. This is the bread of heaven. And yet they speak of it as worthless food. They ungratefully denigrate God's provision for them in the wilderness.

So what do they do? They don't acknowledge God's power; they don't appreciate His generosity; they don't recognize His mercy; they don't accept His sovereignty; and, they don't trust His word—all rolled up into one. That's how sinful their sin is. But, my friends, understand that every time we sin, we do the same thing. Every time we sin, every time we decide that we're going to do it our way and not God's way, we are doing the exact same thing as Israel. Don't you point your finger back at them until you realize when we do it our way we're doing the same thing. Well, there's the gravity of their sin. They dishonor God. . .

vv. 8-9 – God's provision of Mercy

First of all, God gives a solution to this situation that has no human explanation for its effectiveness.

Secondly, isn't it interesting that in other Hebrew sacrifices when the representative was being prepared to be slain in your place for your sin, what did the head of the family have to do? You had to touch the representative sacrifice. Here all they do is look. Just look. They look away from themselves and to this symbol, this sign God has provided. Can you imagine a more dramatic way to emphasize that Israel has nothing to do with the sparing, forgiving, saving power that God is going to display in the healing of them from the bites of these poisonous snakes? They are contributing zippo, zilch, nothing, nada! All they have to do is look! Is this not the essential act of saving faith? Looking to Christ...looking away from ourselves, from our good deeds and our bad deeds, and looking to Him alone? Surely this is one of the reasons why Jesus will point to this passage when He's trying to explain faith to Nicodemus. . .

But of course there's something a little bit different about what we see when we look to Christ and Him crucified. The copper snake was a picture of God's vehicle of just judgment on Israel for their sin. But the cross of Christ is a picture of God's just judgment on sin...but there's a problem. If it's just a picture of God's just judgment on sin (like the snake), who would be on the cross? If it were just a picture of God's just judgment, it would be you and me, but it's not. There's a substitute there. There's God's own Son. And He is bearing a just judgment that you deserve. Because in the final analysis, the cross is not only a picture of God's just judgment, but of His lavish mercy in providing for you a substitute, to whom all you have to do is look and live.

Wiersbe: Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross (**John 3:14**). (“*Lifted up*” was a phrase used in that day to refer to crucifixion.) The comparisons between the bronze serpent in Moses' day and the cross of Christ help us better understand the meaning of God's grace in salvation. All people have been infected by sin and will one day die and face judgment (**Heb. 9:27**), but if they look by faith to Christ, He will save them and give them eternal life. Looking to the bronze serpent saved people from physical death, but looking to Christ saves us from eternal death.

But why should Moses make a model of a serpent, the very creature that was causing the people to die? Because on the cross, Jesus became sin for us – the very thing that condemns people – and bore in His body that which brings spiritual death (**2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 2:22-24**). Moses didn't hide the bronze serpent; he lifted it up on a pole and put the pole where everybody could see it! So our Lord was crucified publicly, outside the city of Jerusalem, and those who hear the Gospel can “*look to Him*” and be saved. “*For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (**Rom. 10:13**).

Moses didn't stick the pole inside the tabernacle or even in the tabernacle court, because nobody is saved by keeping the law. The uplifted serpent was the only cure in the camp, just as Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners in the world (**Acts 4:12; John 14:6**). Nobody could look at the bronze serpent for another person; each dying sinner had to look for himself or herself. The salvation Christ offers is personal and individual, and each of us must look to Christ by faith. No matter how hard they tried, no dying Jew could save himself or herself. The only salvation available was what God had graciously provide, and if you rejected it, you died.

Sin and death came into this world through a look (**Gen. 3:6**), and the only deliverance from sin and eternal death is by a look of faith: “*Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth*” (**Isa. 45:22**, NKJV). To look means to exercise faith, and the only way to be saved is by faith (**Eph. 2:8-19**). A dying Jew might argue, “It's a foolish remedy,” but it still worked (**1 Cor. 1:18-25**). Or the dying Israelite might say, “It's too simple,” but the remedy still worked.

Imagine the joy in the camp of Israel when the word got out that there was a cure available for everybody! The only people who couldn't be delivered from death were those who for some reason wouldn't look by faith or those who didn't know that a remedy was available. How important it is for us to get the good news out that “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*” (**1 Tim. 1:15**).

TEXT: Numbers 21:21-35

TITLE: *MILITARY TRIUMPHS – PREPARATION TO CONQUEST THE LAND*

BIG IDEA:

GOD GRANTS VICTORIES OVER POWERFUL FOES WHEN WE FOLLOW HIS GAME PLAN AND DON'T SHRINK BACK IN FEAR FROM THE CHALLENGE

INTRODUCTION:

Israel certainly had abundant testimony to God's power and faithfulness. However, Israel also had a track record of disbelief and spiritual failure. But God continued to be patient and gracious and encouraged the nation to press forward with the divine agenda. Once the nation committed to God's game plan and fully trusted His guidance, they began to see the types of military victories that prepared them to conquest the Promised Land.

Ronald Allen: The victories over Sihon and Og are celebrated throughout Israel's history, even to our own day. These are the true beginning of victories. The defeat of Arad was a nuisance issue. Sihon and Og represented reputable opponents; their land became part of the inheritance of the tribes of Israel. There is a sense in which the area of Transjordan is somewhat touchy; we are ambivalent about these territories. They are a part of the promise; yet they are not the heart of the land. But they were the first of victories, a note of assurance from God that the real victories were still to come.

Raymond Brown: Subjugating the kingdoms of Sihon and Og was the greatest possible encouragement to a people challenged by greater tests in the land beyond Jordan. It 'ranked with the Exodus as a paradigm of God's miraculous intervention on behalf of his people'. Their victories east of the river went down in their history as a perpetual reminder of the Lord's omnipotence in time of human vulnerability. The Lord who had given them victory on one side of the Jordan would not fail them on the other.

J. Ligon Duncan: The Wars of the Land

This whole passage is about God's sovereignty and our responsibility. There is a theme which has been often explicit and sometimes implicit since the children of Israel have left the land of Egypt on the way to Canaan, and it is a theme that will only become more and more explicit as the journey to Canaan draws nearer and nearer to its final objective, and that theme is simply this: **The land is yours; now take it...the land is yours; now take it.** God expressly and repeatedly tells the children of Israel that He has given Canaan to them. He has given the land to them. He will give the kings and their armies and their cities, and their sons and their wealth to the children of Israel. But Israel has a responsibility to take the land which God has given to them, and so this theme becomes more and more explicit, repeated frequently: **The land is yours; now take it.** This whole passage bears the mark of that theme. In fact, this passage stresses that God is our guide, our provider, and our conqueror. He is the source of our

provision and our success, and we have a responsibility to follow in trust and obedience as He makes promises to us.

I. (:21-32) TRIUMPH OVER THE AMORITES (INCLUDING KING SIHON)

A. (:21-22) Attempt at Diplomacy

1. Request for Passage Directed to Sihon, King of the Amorites

“Then Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, saying, 22 ‘Let me pass through your land.’”

Timothy Ashley: The term **Amorite** has various meanings in the OT: Canaanites generally (e.g, **Genesis 15:16**), inhabitants of the land west of the Jordan (e.g, **Joshua 5:1**), inhabitants of the regions of Judah (e.g, **Joshua 10:5-6**), inhabitants of the Negeb and the region to the southeast of the Dead Sea (e.g, **Genesis 14:7**), and very often, as here, the inhabitants east of the Jordan under the rule of Sihon and Og.

Bruce Hurt: What is notable about the passages related to the Amorites is that they describe the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy given to Abraham in **Genesis 15:16** *“Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”* In these passages the time of judgment of the Amorite had come and would meted out on two Amorite kings, Sihon, king of Heshbon (**Nu 21:22-32**) and Og, the king of Bashan (**Nu 21:33-35**). Israel is not journeying north along the eastern edge of Moab and so Israel requests passage through the Amorite kingdom of Sihon.

2. Three Resolutions Proving Israel was No Economic or Military Threat

a. No Seizing of Food

“We will not turn off into field or vineyard;”

b. No Seizing of Water

“we will not drink water from wells.”

c. No Threatening Detours

“We will go by the king's highway until we have passed through your border.”

B. (:23) Attack Led by Sihon

1. Diplomacy Rejected

“But Sihon would not permit Israel to pass through his border.”

2. Deployment of Troops in Battle

“So Sihon gathered all his people and went out against Israel in the wilderness,”

3. Deadly Combat Instigated

“and came to Jahaz and fought against Israel.”

C. (:24-26) Appropriation of Captured Cities

1. (:24) Widespread Military Victories

“Then Israel struck him with the edge of the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok, as far as the sons of Ammon; for the border of the sons of Ammon was Jazer.”

Wiersbe: The Lord wanted Israel to possess the land east of the Jordan, so He permitted Sihon to attack Israel. Sihon’s capital was at Heshbon, but he and his army came south to Jahaz, about twenty miles north of the Arnon River, and there challenged Israel. God’s people won the battle and possessed the land from the Arnon to the Jabbok River. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, the territory east of the Jordan River was given to Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh (**Num. 32**).

2. (:25) Widespread Inhabitation of Amorite Cities

“And Israel took all these cities and Israel lived in all the cities of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all her villages.”

3. (:26) Well-known Significance of Heshbon

“For Heshbon was the city of Sihon, king of the Amorites, who had fought against the former king of Moab and had taken all his land out of his hand, as far as the Arnon.”

D. (:27-30) Assimilation of Taunt Song to Boast about Israelite Victory

1. (:27) Commitment to Build Heshbon as City of Sihon, King of Amorites

*“Therefore those who use proverbs say, ‘Come to Heshbon! Let it be built!
So let the city of Sihon be established.’”*

MacArthur: These words came from the wise men, probably among the Amorites. The words of **vv. 27-30** describe the Amorites’ defeat of the Moabites N of the Arnon River. Ironically, as the Amorites had taken the land from the Moabites, the Israelites had taken the land from the Amorites. The purpose of these words cited by Moses was to substantiate Israel’s right to the land. According to God’s commandments, the territory belonging to the Moabites was not to be taken by Israel because the Moabites were descendants of Lot (**Dt 2:9**). However, what belonged to the Amorites had been promised to Israel and was theirs for the taking.

2. (:28) Fiery Judgment from Heshbon Against Moabite Cities

*“For a fire went forth from Heshbon, A flame from the town of Sihon;
It devoured Ar of Moab, The dominant heights of the Arnon.”*

David Thompson: The proverb of Heshbon really was a secular proverb that ends up presenting truth about God. It is an “Amorite War Taunt” that was originally written by an Amorite composer, after Sihon had conquered Heshbon and the Moabites. Jeremiah would actually quote this many centuries later (**Jer. 48:45-46**).

This was a proud proverb. It is comprised of six stanzas. The first five all have to do with what Sihon did to the Moabites, and the last one what Israel did to Sihon.

Stanza #1 - The Amorites may come and build Heshbon. **21:27a**

Stanza #2 - Heshbon is now established as the city of Sihon. **21:27b**

Stanza #3 - Fiery judgment came from Sihon and destroyed Heshbon and other Moabite cities. **21:28**

Stanza #4 - Woe judgments have hit the Moabites and Chemosh, their false deity, didn't save them. **21:29a**

Stanza #5 - Sihon the Amorite King took the Moabite sons and daughters captive. **21:29b**

These people were proud. Singing their songs about how great they were, how great their city and king were. But that all changed right here. Israel added a stanza.

Stanza #6 - The Israelites cast them down and took their land. **21:30-31**

The Amorite proverb just took on a new ending. Instead of Sihon using this composition to celebrate his Moabite victory, Israel used it to celebrate their victory over the Amorites.

3. (:29) Proclamation of Woes as Moabites Taken Captive by Amorites

“Woe to you, O Moab! You are ruined, O people of Chemosh! He has given his sons as fugitives, And his daughters into captivity, To an Amorite king, Sihon.”

Ronald Allen: In the Taunt Song of Heshbon, it was not just the people of Moab who had been defeated by Sihon in the earlier engagement; it was their god Chemosh as well (v. 29). But now a new God had come on the scene. His name was Yahweh, and his power was not limited by geography at all!

Bruce Hurt: Chemosh was the god of the Moabites (**Numbers 21:29; Jeremiah 48:7, 13, 46**). Scripture calls him *“the abomination of Moab”* (**1 Kings 11:7**). Unfortunately, Chemosh-worship was introduced into Israelite culture by King Solomon, who had wives from other cultures who turned his heart to other gods (**1 Kings 11:4–7**). Chemosh was one of those gods worshiped by Solomon's wives. The cult of Chemosh was eventually destroyed in Judah by King Josiah (**2 Kings 23**).

The meaning of the name Chemosh is not understood, though some scholars believe it may have meant “destroyer” or “subduer.” Chemosh was also seen as a fish-god. He

was the national deity of the Moabites and the Ammonites, and, according to the Moabite Stone (the Mesha Stele), Chemosh was associated with the goddess Ashteroth, another false god worshiped by wayward Israelites. Chemosh is thought to have been a deity similar to Baal, and there is also evidence, both from the Moabite Stone and from Scripture, that Chemosh may have been the same deity as the Ammonite Moloch (**1 Kings 11:7, 33**). At least, Chemosh and Moloch were two manifestations of the same false god. King Solomon built “*high places*” to both gods in the same location, the mountain east of Jerusalem. The worship of Chemosh was truly an abomination. One place in Scripture records Chemosh demanding human sacrifice: in the days of Judah’s King Jehoram, the king of Moab faced military defeat, and the Moabite ruler “*took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall*” (**2 Kings 3:27**).

4. (:30) Ruin of Heshbon by Israelites

“But we have cast them down, Heshbon is ruined as far as Dibon, Then we have laid waste even to Nophah, Which reaches to Medeba.”

Eugene Merrill: A boastful Amorite song celebrating their victory over the hapless Moabites now was sung by Israel to celebrate her victory over the Amorites.

[like the Baltimore Ravens dancing in revenge on the Titans logo Jan. 10, 2021]

E. (:31-32) Amorites Further Defeated

1. (:31) Domination by Israel

“Thus Israel lived in the land of the Amorites.”

2. (:32) Dispossession of the Amorites

“And Moses sent to spy out Jazer, and they captured its villages and dispossessed the Amorites who were there.”

Wiersbe: After a “mop-up” operation around Jazer, Israel turned its attention to Bashan, a very fertile region east of the Sea of Galilee and south of Mount Hermon.

II. (:33-35) TRIUMPH OVER BASHAN (INCLUDING KING OG)

A. (:33) Battle Against Og at Edrei in Bashan

“Then they turned and went up by the way of Bashan, and Og the king of Bashan went out with all his people, for battle at Edrei.”

Thomas Constable: Heshbon was a city, but Bashan was a territory. Bashan lay north of the Yarmuk Wadi. Evidently at the time of Israel’s conquest Og controlled the territory south of the Yarmuk as far as the Jabbok, the area known as Gilead. [Note: **Eugene H. Merrill**, *Kingdom of Priests*, p89.] Og’s domain lay north of the Jabbok Wadi and extended north as far as Mt. Hermon, about 60 miles north of the Sea of Chinnereth (Galilee). The town of Edrei (**Numbers 21:33**) stood near the border of Bashan. See Deuteronomy 3:1-17 for a fuller description of this victory.

B. (:34) Assurance of Victory from the Lord

“But the LORD said to Moses, ‘Do not fear him, for I have given him into your hand, and all his people and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon.’”

Raymond Brown: Although victorious over Sihon’s army, the travelers had every reason to be fearful. The territory ahead was inhabited by those warriors of gigantic stature who, decades earlier, had terrified the older generation (13:28, 32–33). King Og of Bashan had enormous physical proportions. His bed was ‘more than thirteen feet long and six feet wide’ but, though mere men might be terrorized by his massive physique, the Lord told Moses that he was no threat to an omnipotent God: ‘Do not be afraid of him, for I have handed him over to you, with his whole army and his land’ (34).

Dennis Cole: The counsel from the Lord is introduced by the secondary introductory formula for divine instruction used in the Book of Numbers (*wayyo ’mer YHWH ’el-mōšeh*). The message from the Lord, that they should not fear the oncoming enemies, was the same one given to the people by Moses, Aaron, Caleb, and Joshua when they were faced with the prospects of entering the Promised Land, a task that seemed to them frightening and formidable (Num 14:9). To hesitate in fear would be to rebel against God, but to advance against a foe just like the one they had just defeated would afford evidence of their faith in a God who fights for them.

C. (:35) Victory Over Og and His People

“So they killed him and his sons and all his people, until there was no remnant left him; and they possessed his land.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Where does God promise you victory and yet demand that you exercise responsibility to appropriate that victory?
- 2) Why did God have Israel completely wipe out these enemy forces?
- 3) How close does boasting in the Lord come to taunting our spiritual enemies?
- 4) Should we be surprised when Satanic opposition intensifies as we get closer to important spiritual goals?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Wiersbe: In their conquest of Canaan, Israel followed the pattern described in **Numbers 21:32-35**. Joshua would send out spies to get the lay of the land. Then he would seek God's special instructions for each attack, obey God's orders by faith, and win the victory. The two times that Joshua didn't follow this pattern, he was defeated (**Josh. 7** and **9**).

Dennis Cole: The traditional Jewish interpretation is that the song is of Amorite origin and that it was adopted and adapted by the Israelites to show their supremacy over the Amorites, who had earlier conquered Moab. The song had been sung by the Amorite bards, but their glorious victory had been shamed by the Israelite conquest of the Amorite territory. The song must be viewed in the literary context of the inclusio formed by the usage of the clauses "*Israel dwelt in all the cities of the Amorites*" in **v. 25** and "*Thus Israel dwelt in the land of the Amorites*" in **v. 31**. Israel, by the hand of their God (**Deut 2:31-33**), had triumphed over the Moabite region the Amorites had conquered. The Amorite song of victory was used against them to bring shame and to discredit the once-powerful king. The account of the battle and the words of this song, which recalled the Amorite victory over Moab, would later give Jephthah his rationale for refusing to return peacefully the region of Gilead to the Ammonite king (**Judg 11:13-33**). Israel possessed the land not by confiscating it from the Ammonites or Moabites but by utterly conquering the Amorites who had previously dispossessed the former inhabitants. They had not entered the Ammonite or Moabite realms of that time period, only that of the stubborn and belligerent Sihon the Amorite. The mention of the territory and towns of Moab also prepares the reader for the Balaam oracles, set in the context of King Balak's ever-growing fear of the Israelites. Portions of this song also would be recounted in the prophets' oracles against Moab in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C., including **Isa 15:1-16:14** and **Jer 48:1-47**.

David Thompson: As Israel started moving right in her relationship with God, she was immediately confronted with hostile and hateful opposition. That is the way it works. When God's people are really moving in the right direction, it is like they are hit with negatives. But what God's people will learn here is this:

**WHEN YOU ARE IN A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, NO
MATTER WHAT THE OPPOSITION, YOU WILL BE VICTORIOUS.**

Sihon and the Amorites controlled the land from the Arnon river in the south to Jabbok (**21:24**). This land was located about 20 miles north of the northern end of the Dead Sea.

Things are beginning to change. Israel is now trusting God and has learned some lessons. They are praising God and obeying God and they are getting victories. **Verse 31** says not only were they able to cross the land of the Amorites, they could live in the land. In fact, Moses sent out spies to all areas and those spies came back and they went and took the land.

In fact, before Israel would take the Promised Land, Moses would actually give Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh this very land as their own (**Numbers 32:33**). . .

LESSONS TO LEARN:

- 1) The more obedient we are the more blessings we receive.
- 2) The more we are obeying God's Word to get those blessings, the hotter the warfare.
- 3) The closer we get to experiencing the ultimate blessings, the greater the opposition.
- 4) When we are faithful to God, He will drop our enemies, one right after another.

Robert Rayburn: All of this we have learned over and over again in the narrative of Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness. Yahweh is ever the faithful guide, provider, and protector of his people. Paul might have summed up this history by saying "*if God is for us, who can be against us.*"

But, typical of the Bible's presentation of believing life, there is, at the same time, a great activity on the part of the people and this too is emphasized dramatically in this narrative. **The Lord may guide, but the people must follow.** Too often Israel had not, but this is a new generation of God's people and they do what they are told. They go out of their way, accept some further delay in reaching the Promised Land, to skirt the territory of Edom and Moab. The Lord provided them water, but, as we read in **v. 18**, not without their digging for it. Indeed, even the princes of the people got down and dug their holes in the wadi floor. There were messengers, diplomats really, who placed before the Amorite court Israel's request for passage. There were soldiers – virtually all adult Israelite men, because there would have been few to none older men left among the people after the death of the previous generation – men who went to battle twice and were victorious in the field. There were spies who scouted the defenses of Jazer to ensure that the Israelite army advanced with the proper tactics. And there were singers who celebrated the victorious advance of the people of God toward their goal. All of this activity is mixed together in the narrative with all that God did for Israel.

We are well used to this interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, between divine grace and human faith and obedience, between what God alone can do and what we must do. Every page of Holy Scripture presents us with this dialectic, these two emphases that remain and must remain constantly in tension with one another. We must trust the Lord for our next step along the way, for victory over our enemies, but, at the same time, that progress toward the goal and that victory over whatever lies or whoever lies in the path of our godliness and fruitfulness and happiness in life require our active obedience and service. God is always sovereign, but the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt on eagle's wings at the Exodus failed to make the Promised Land not because God failed her, but because they failed God!

It is so hard to remain on this knife-edge – poised between God’s grace and our believing obedience – we are so inclined to, in fact we do it every hour of every day, relax the tension by emphasizing one at the expense of the other: either count on God to do whatever he’s going to do in us and for us with little thought of our own responsibility and accountability *or* to begin thinking little of God’s provision and counting on our own efforts. We fail so frequently to keep that tension and to remain on that knife-edge that we must constantly be reminded that the Christian life is and must be always the simultaneous embrace of both realities. In speaking of the absolute dependence of man upon God and, at the same time, the absolute necessity of man’s active faith and active obedience, **Charles Spurgeon** said this:

“I believe in predestination, yea, even in its very jots and tittles. I believe that the path of a single grain of dust in the March wind is ordained and settled by a decree which cannot be violated; that every word and thought of man, every fluttering of a sparrow’s wing, every flight of a fly...that everything, in fact is foreknown and foreordained. But I do equally believe in the free agency of man, that man acts as he wills, especially in moral operations – choosing the evil with a will that is unbiased by anything that comes from God, biased only by his own depravity of heart and the perverseness of his habits; choosing the right too, with perfect freedom, though sacredly guided and led by the Holy Spirit... I believe that man is as accountable as if there were no destiny whatever... Where these two truths meet I do not know, nor do I want to know. They do not puzzle me, since I have given up my mind to believing them both.”

Charles Simeon, the great Anglican preacher, is better still. Speaking about the age-old controversy regarding grace and free will, he writes:

“I love the simplicity of the Scriptures; and I wish to receive and inculcate every truth precisely in the way, and to the extent, that it is set forth in the inspired volume. ... I have a great jealousy on this head; never to speak more or less than I believe to be the mind of the Spirit in the passage I am expounding. ... I would run after nothing and shun nothing. ... the truth is not in the middle, and not in one extreme, but in both extremes.”

And Simeon was talking about the very two subjects that are front and center in the narrative we have before us in **Numbers 21**: what God is doing for his people and what his people must do in obedience to God.

TEXT: Numbers 22:1-21

TITLE: *BALAAAM -- TENSION BETWEEN WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT GOD WANTS*

BIG IDEA:
IMPURE MOTIVES LEAD TO COMPROMISING SITUATIONS

INTRODUCTION:

Chapters 22-24 cover the story of Balaam and Balak as the Lord assures Israel of His covenant promise to bless the chosen nation. In this introductory portion, Balaam demonstrates the tension between his commitment to remain loyal to the Lord's command and revelation, and yet push for his own greedy agenda as well. As Israel has left Egypt and now wandered for 40 years in the desert, the nation has been transformed from an oppressed, fearful people to a strong fighting force that now strikes terror in the hearts of the Moabites and Midianites after a victorious military showing against the Amorites. Israel is poised to enter the promised land, but there are hidden attacks behind the scenes that still threaten to undermine God's prophesied promise of future blessing. There is no prophet that more symbolizes impure motives and a double-minded heart than the intriguing character of Balaam.

Constable: Balaam's importance in Numbers should be obvious in view of the amount of text Moses devoted to his activities (**chs 22-24**). His oracles are the centerpiece of this revelation. God announced through these revelations that He would bless Israel and that He would fulfill His promises to the patriarchs. The restatement of these promises was especially appropriate at this moment in Israel's experience. The nation received a reminder that God would give them the land of Canaan west of the Jordan, not just the territories of Sihon and Og. That these messages had come through a man who was not an Israelite, but received pay to curse Israel from her enemies, would have given the Israelites even greater confidence. The oracles, therefore, not only weakened the will of Israel's enemies in Moab, Midian, and the other Canaanite nations, but they encouraged the Israelites.

Gordon Wenham: In **Genesis 12:1-3**, and subsequent passages, Abraham was promised three things: land, descendants and a covenant relationship. Balaam's first oracle mentions Israel's special relationship with God and her great population (**23:8**; cf. **Gen. 12:3. Num. 22:17**; cf. **Gen. 13:16; 12:2-3**). The second oracle concentrates on Israel's covenant relationship (cf. **Gen. 12:2-3**). The third vision describes how Israel will shortly enjoy peace and prosperity in the promised land. The fourth vision describes an Israelite king, a much rarer element in the patriarchal promises (cf. **Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11**). The eloquent restatement of the old promises is most appropriate at this juncture. Israel, camping beside the Jordan, the eastern border of Canaan, is reminded that her promised home is not the territory of Sihon and Og which they have just conquered, but lies to the west. The extraordinary means through which the heathen prophet is led to make these predictions is a sign of their divine origin and a guarantee

of their ultimate fulfilment. The people should, therefore, take courage despite the daunting prospect of the struggles ahead of them.

Roy Gane: According to **Deuteronomy 2:9**, the Lord has already commanded Moses not to disturb the Moabites or take any of their land, but poor Balak does not know this. So, ruling out a preemptive military strike, even with the help of his Midianite allies (**Num. 22:4**), he comes up with an alternative proactive strategy to utilize a secret weapon: a curse by Balaam. Balak does not expect Balaam to destroy the Israelites but only to soften them up and thereby even the odds to manageable proportions so that his ground troops will have a fighting chance (**22:5–6**). Balaam, a diviner (**Josh. 13:22**) who originated from the northeast by the Euphrates River, has an international reputation for pronouncing effective blessings, and when it comes to curses, you could say that he is the maledictorian in his class (**Num. 22:6b**).

J. Ligon Duncan: Conspiracy to Curse

What is the message of this passage? When God has set His blessing upon you, nothing can thwart it; no power of hell, no scheme of man can ever pluck you from His hand.

(:1) PROLOGUE – TRANSITION – ISRAEL IN POSITION

“Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.”

Harrison: The Israelites had been careful not to provoke the Moabites to battle, journeying well to the east of their territory as they moved north to the Arnon gorge. Now Balak feared for the safety of his own kingdom, and his trepidation was shared by his subjects, who must have heard reports about the fate of Sihon and Og.

I. (:2-6) KING BALAK OF MOAB SOLICITS HELP FROM BALAAM (IN CONCERT WITH MIDIAN) -- IMPURE MOTIVES MAKE US GOOD CANDIDATES FOR COMPROMISING PROPOSALS

A. (:2-3) Terrified by the Threat of Israel -- Sensing a Slaughter

1. (:2) Terrified Because of the Slaughter of the Amorites

“Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites.”

Raymond Brown: News of Israel’s conquests spread quickly throughout Moabite territory. Balak, its ruler, was distraught at the prospect of an invasion, particularly as the travelers had just conquered the Amorites, a people who had earlier subdued Moab. His disturbed mind hit on a bright idea: he would seek supernatural help rather than rely solely on military strength. Why not call in a widely acclaimed soothsayer, Balaam from Mesopotamia, and pay him handsomely to put an inhibiting curse on the Israelites? Balak’s soldiers could then engage in battle with a people whose prospect of military success was blighted from the start.

Wiersbe: He had a reputation for success in **divination** (receiving hidden knowledge, especially about the future) and **incantation** (the use of occult power to grant blessing or cursing), and he was willing to sell his services to all who could pay his fee.

2. (:3) Terrified Because of the Large Numbers of Israelites

*“So Moab was in great fear because of the people,
for they were numerous;
and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel.”*

Raymond Brown: Balak was filled with dread (22:3); literally, ‘a sickening dread came over him’ whenever he thought about the approaching multitude, and he told his senior counsellors of his anxiety (4). Many of our contemporaries can sympathize with him. Fear is one of the recurrent hazards of our time. Like so much anxiety, his worst fears were groundless. God had told Moses not to ‘*harass the Moabites ... you are to pass by the region of Moab*’. The great Victorian preacher **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** used to say that ‘anxiety does nothing to rob tomorrow of its sorrows; it only robs today of its strength’. We have something to learn from Balak—so much anxiety is wasted emotional energy and unnecessary mental torture.

B. (:4) Aligning with Adjacent Midian

*“And Moab said to the elders of Midian, ‘Now this horde will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field.’
And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time.”*

Ronald Allen: The proverbial figure of an ox licking the grass is particularly fitting for a pastoral people. Balak knew how quickly the fragile grasses of the lands of Moab could be eaten by large beasts. The image of Israel as an ox is an emphatic symbol of her strength and power. The association of Moab to the Midianites in this verse is more significant than we might first think. It will be another plot developed by Midianite collusion with Moab that will finally bring great disaster on Israel (**ch. 5**, the apostasy of Israel at Baal Peor.)

C. (:5-6) Calling for a Curse

1. (:5a) Dispatching Delegation to Seek Assistance

“So he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying,”

Timothy Asher: The term the River (*hannāhār*), without any accompanying designation, usually denotes the Euphrates (e.g., **Gen. 31:21; Exod. 23:31; Josh. 24:2–3, 14–15**). The only exception seems to be **Isa. 19:2**, which refers to the Nile. Such an exception, however, is not enough to overturn the rule. Pethor is almost universally agreed to be ancient Pitru (modern Tell el-Aḥmar), a site on the Sajur, a tributary of the Euphrates, about two miles from its confluence with the Euphrates, and about 12 mi. south of Carchemish. Pitru is mentioned in a report of Shalmaneser II’s (ca. 859–824) first campaign against Damascus, and even earlier by the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose

III (15th cent.). The distance between Pethor (Pitru) and the plains of Moab would be over 370 miles. The journey would take an estimated 20–25 days, hence the four journeys in the story about 90 days. The biblical narrative ignores the length of the journeys, choosing rather to structure the narrative on three pairs of days (days 1–2: **22:2–14**; days 3–4: **22:15–35**; days 5–6: **22:36–24:35**).

Constable: Balaam's name probably came from a Hebrew root meaning "destroyer" or "devourer." His father's name, Beor, apparently came from another word meaning "to burn," "eat off," or "destroy." The name of Balaam's father suggests that he may have been a sorcerer and may have given Balaam his power as well as his name at birth. However, Balaam may have received his name later in life when his powers with the spirit world became known. In either case Balaam's name suggests that he was a veteran conjurer of curses.

2. (:5b-6) Making the Case for Cursing Israel

a. Vision Casting -- Behold -- Imminent Serious Danger

*"Behold, a people came out of Egypt;
behold, they cover the surface of the land,
and they are living opposite me."*

b. Action Proposal -- Come and Curse

*"Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me
since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat
them and drive them out of the land."*

Harrison: Balak wished Balaam to exercise his training in cursing and proclaim maledictions upon Moab's unexpected and unwelcome neighbors so that, having this advantage over them, he could exterminate them. Balak's invitation ended with an ingratiating comment that reflected his knowledge of Balaam's expertise.

c. Guaranteed Results – You Hold the Key to Blessing or Cursing

*"For I know that he whom you bless is blessed,
and he whom you curse is cursed."*

II. (:7-14) PAGAN PROPHET BALAAM FORBIDDEN BY THE LORD TO GO AND CURSE ISRAEL -- IMPURE MOTIVES REBUKED BY DIVINE REVELATION

A. (:7-8) Initial Interaction

1. (:7) Delegation Makes Their Pitch

*"So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees
for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated
Balak's words to him."*

2. (:8) Divine Guidance Sought by Balaam

"And he said to them, 'Spend the night here, and I will bring word back

to you as the LORD may speak to me.’ And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam.”

Gordon Keddie: Balaam’s use of the word *YHWH* for “*Lord*” would seem to indicate that he specifically sought the God of Israel for guidance in the matter. This does not indicate any faith in the living God, beyond a general acknowledgement of his existence, or the possibility of his existence. The world of pagans is populated with gods of all sorts and a diviner like Balaam, far from disbelieving in the gods of other nations, would accept their reality as a matter of course. His job, as he saw it, was to find out the will of the god, or gods, directly relevant to the case.

B. (:9-12) Resounding Rejection

1. (:9) Examining the Source

“Then God came to Balaam and said, ‘Who are these men with you?’”

Iain Duguid: Sure enough, the Lord appeared to Balaam in the night and asked him, “*Who are these men with you?*” (v. 9). On the face of it, that is a simple question, but why did God ask it? He certainly didn’t need the information from Balaam since he already knows all things. In the Bible God typically asks questions not for his own benefit but for the benefit of his hearers. When God said to Adam, “*Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?*” (**Genesis 3:11**), he was giving Adam an opportunity to confess his sins. When the Lord asked Isaiah, “*Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?*” (**Isaiah 6:8**), he wasn’t expressing personal uncertainty; he was giving Isaiah the opportunity to volunteer for the mission. So too when the Lord said to Balaam, “*Who are these men?*” he wanted Balaam to reflect on who would be giving him his orders if he accepted their commission. What authority did they have to summon him, and what power did they have to reward him? These were not gods who had come to him—they were mere men.

Bob Deffinbaugh: It was a good question. Who were these men? They were the emissaries of Balak, the king of Moab. These were men who represented nations and governments that were opposed to the nation Israel. These were men who were seeking to persuade Balaam to curse the very people God had blessed. In the light of this, what were these men doing in Balaam’s house, as his guests? To invite one to be a guest in your home was to grant them the highest level of intimacy and fellowship. . . Inviting them to stay the night was the first of a sequence of mistakes Balaam made with regard to Balak and his requests.

2. (:10-11) Explaining the Situation

a. (:10) The Players

*“And Balaam said to God,
‘Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent word to me,’”*

b. (:11) The Proposition

*“Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover
the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I*

may be able to fight against them, and drive them out.”

3. (:12) Excluding the Options

“And God said to Balaam, ‘Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people; for they are blessed.’”

Gordon Wenham: In traditional manner Balaam seeks God’s will at night. Quite unequivocally he is told *You shall not go with them; You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed (12)*. Balaam is thus trapped between the demands of Balak and the commands of God. It is this conflict that sustains the whole drama that follows.

C. (:13-14) Communicating the Counsel of the Lord

1. (:13) Balaam Communicates to the Delegation

“So Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, ‘Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.’”

Timothy Ashley: Yahweh forbids Balaam to do two things: to go with Balak’s messengers, and to curse Israel. In the morning Balaam reports to the messengers only that Yahweh will not let him go with them. The messengers then return to inform Balak of Balaam’s rejection of his offer.

2. (:14) Delegation Communicates to Balak

“And the leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak, and said, ‘Balaam refused to come with us.’”

III. (:15-20) BALAAM SOLICITED AGAIN WITH A BLANK CHECK -- IMPURE MOTIVES ALWAYS OPEN TO NEW POSSIBILITIES

A. (:15-17) Improving the Offer

1. (:15) Better Delegation

“Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former.”

2. (:16) Better Overcoming of Obstacles

“And they came to Balaam and said to him, ‘Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, ‘Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me;’”

3. (:17) Better Compensation

“for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me.”

4. (:17b) Same Solicitation to Curse Israel

“Please come then, curse this people for me.”

B. (:18) Professing Unwavering Loyalty to the Word of God

“And Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, ‘Though Balak were

to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the LORD my God.”

Wiersbe: Knowing God’s will in the matter, Balaam should have refused even to consider the second offer, but the hireling soothsayer was still hoping to find some way to circumvent God’s will. In light of the fact that Balaam even considered the new offer, his speech in **verse 18** is just so much pious talk. With his lips, he professed to obey the Lord, but in his heart he coveted the money and hoped God would change His mind.

C. (:19-20) Opening the Door to a Possible Change of Plans

1. (:19) Revisiting Divine Guidance

*“And now please, you also stay here tonight,
and I will find out what else the LORD will speak to me.”*

2. (:20) Revised Divine Instructions

“And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, ‘If the men have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do.’”

(:21) EPILOGUE – BALAAM GOES TO BALAK

*“So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey,
and went with the leaders of Moab.”*

Iain Duguid: Balaam went with them in haste and without any explicit clarification of what had transpired overnight, presumably giving the envoys the impression that he had straightened out the difficulties with the Lord and was now all set to earn his substantial fees by cursing Israel.

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How encouraging is it to realize that despite Satan’s unseen attempts to attack God’s people; nothing can thwart God’s kingdom purposes and His determination to bless His people?
- 2) When are you double-minded in coming to the Lord for guidance – asking for His will but in your heart desiring already to go a certain direction?
- 3) What are some of the evidences that Balaam was not a true prophet of the Lord, not a genuine believer?
- 4) Why can’t we always take pious expressions of spiritual loyalty at face value?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Gordon Wenham: The charming naïvety of these stories disguises a brilliance of literary composition and a profundity of theological reflection. The narrative is at once both very funny and deadly serious. The stupidity and stubbornness of the human characters, Balaam and Balak, is accentuated by the behaviour of the ass. This animal, proverbial for its dullness and obstinacy, is shown to have more spiritual insight than the super-prophet from Mesopotamia whom Balak is prepared to hire at enormous expense to curse Israel. Yet this numb-skulled, money-grubbing, heathen seer is inspired by the Spirit of God with a vision of Israel's future destiny truly messianic in its dimensions. The drama, irony and paradoxes of this story fascinate and perplex the reader. Was Balaam a sinner or a saint? Why did God change his mind about letting Balaam go? What did Balaam really foretell in his visions? What is the point of including these stories in Numbers? It is convenient to consider some of these general points before beginning the detailed exegesis. . .

the drama falls into six main acts in two sets of three (22:7–14, 15–20, 21–35, 41–23:12, 13–26, 27–24:25); in every one there is the insistence that Balaam say only what the Lord permits him to say (22:12, 20, 35; 23:3, 12, 17, 26; 24:2, 13). There are further correspondences between the first three acts and the last three. In the first, second, fourth and fifth acts Balaam seeks the Lord on his own initiative (22:8, 19; 23:3, 15), in the third and sixth God meets him unbidden (22:22; 24:1–2). The third and sixth acts also match each other in being considerably longer than the preceding pair. . .

It must be remembered that biblical writers rarely comment explicitly on the characters of the actors. 'The narrator's emotional and moral values are as a rule conveyed indirectly, by the implicit tenor of the stories.' If one searches for such oblique clues to the narrator's evaluation of Balaam in these chapters, two stand out. First, Balaam is offered 'fees for divination' (22:7) and resorts to 'omens' (24:1), abominable practices that were not permitted in Israel (23:23; Deut. 18:10; 1 Sam. 15:23; 2 Kgs 17:17). Second, the conduct of the ass prefigures that of Balaam.⁶ Just as Balaam drives on his ass until brought up short by the angel of the Lord, so Balak will push Balaam to curse Israel until he is stopped by his encounter with God. As God opens the ass's mouth, so he will put his words in Balaam's to declare his will. This parallelism between Balaam and his ass suggests that the ability to declare God's word is not necessarily a sign of Balaam's holiness, only that God can use anyone to be his spokesman.

Ronald Allen: Balaam is universally condemned in the scripture for moral, ethical, and religious faults (see 31:8, 16; Deut 23:3-6; Josh 13:22; 24:9-10; Judg 11:23-25; Neh 13:1-3; Mic 6:5; 2 Peter 2:15-16; Jude 11; Rev 2:14). . .

Balaam is not a good prophet who went bad or a bad prophet trying to be good. He is altogether outside Israel's prophetic tradition. He is a pagan, foreign national whose

mantic acts center on animal divination, including the dissection of animal livers, the movement of animals and the flight of birds. He believed that he had a way with the gods, a hold on them. To him Yahweh was not the Lord of heaven but just another deity whom he might manipulate. He was in for the surprise of his life.

Dennis Cole: Balaam falls into the category of a diviner who emerges as a prophet. His initial oracles are derived after performing ritual sacrifice and other divining activities on the heights of the mountains, exercising the skills in which he was trained. Later his oracles come directly from the Lord without ritual preface. His expressed abilities include *naḥaš*, “to seek an omen” (23:23; 24:1) and *qesem*, “divination by casting lots” or “clairvoyance” (22:7; 23:23). The method of *naḥaš* was that practiced by Joseph during his leadership role in Egypt (Gen 44:5, 15); and *qesem* is known from the practice of visionary diviners among the false prophets of Israel (Ezek 12:9; Zech 10:2). Balaam gave no pretense of being a sorcerer who might actually change the will of the God (or even the gods); for he proclaimed, “*I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the Lord my God*” (22:18), and again, “*I must speak only what God puts in my mouth*” (22:38). Balak’s expectations were quite the contrary. He had hired Balaam expressly to change the course of Israel’s pathway of God’s blessing which they had heretofore experienced. What Balak wanted was a sorcerer’s skill, but what he acquired was a diviner’s Divine direction. In the end Balak became the recipient of that which he had intended for Israel, in fulfillment of the promise the Lord made to Abram, “*I will bless those who bless you, but whoever curses you I will curse*” (Gen 12:3). In this context Milgrom concludes, “Thus Israel’s blessing moves from the present to the future, from a description of Israel’s potential to its eventual fulfillment, reaching its crescendo in the full retribution it will exact from Balak (through his nation) for defying God by attempting to destroy Israel.”

OUTLINE OF THE BALAAM ORACLES

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING: Arabah of Moab along the Jordan across from Jericho (22:1)

CYCLE I: FIRST MESSENGERS SENT TO BALAAM (22:2–14)

Balak Fears Israel; Sends First Messengers to Balaam (22:2–7)

Balaam’s Response to the Messengers (22:8)

God’s First Encounter with Balaam: Don’t Go (22:9–12)

Balaam Refuses to Go to Moab (22:13)

Balak’s Messengers Return Home to Moab (22:14)

CYCLE II: SECOND SET OF MESSENGERS SENT TO BALAAM (22:15–21)

Balak Sends More Messengers to Balaam (22:15–17)

Balaam’s Response to the New Messengers (22:18–19)

Balaam’s Second Encounter with God: Go and Speak (22:20)

Balaam Departs with Messengers to Moab (22:21)

CYCLE III: GOD’S MESSENGER SENT TO BALAAM (22:22–40)

Angel of Yahweh Appears: Donkey Sees (22:22–23)

Angel of Yahweh Appears Second Time: Donkey Sees (22:24–25)
Angel of Yahweh Appears Third Time: Donkey Sees (22:26–27)
Balaam's Third Encounter with God (22:28–35)
Yahweh Opens Donkey's Mouth (22:28–30)
Yahweh Opens Balaam's Eyes (22:31–34)
Yahweh's Message: Go and Speak (22:35)
Balaam Meets with Balak (22:36–40)

CYCLE IV: FIRST ORACLE OF BALAAM (22:41–23:13)

Balak Takes Balaam to Cultic Site (22:41)
Balaam Prepares to Meet with Yahweh (23:1–3)
Yahweh Meets with Balaam (23:4–6)
Balaam's First Oracle (23:7–10)
Balak's Response to Balaam (23:11–13)

CYCLE V: SECOND ORACLE OF BALAAM (23:14–26)

Balak Takes Balaam to Another Cultic Site (23:14)
Balaam Prepares to Meet with Yahweh (23:15)
Yahweh Meets with Balaam (23:16–17)
Balaam's Second Oracle (23:18–24)
Balak's Second Response to Balaam (23:25–26)

CYCLE VI: THIRD ORACLE OF BALAAM (23:27–24:14)

Balak Takes Balaam to a Third Cultic Site (23:27–28)
Balaam Prepares to Meet with Yahweh (23:29–30)
Balaam's Third Oracle (24:1–9)
Balak's Final Response to Balaam (24:10–11)
Balaam's Final Response to Balaam (24:12–14)

CYCLE VII: ORACLES FOUR–SEVEN OF BALAAM (24:15–24)

Balaam's Fourth Oracle—Future Leader Promised (24:15–19)
Oracle against the Edomites
Balaam's Fifth Oracle—Against the Amalekites (24:20)
Balaam's Sixth Oracle—Against the Kenites (24:21–22)
Balaam's Seventh Oracle—Against Asshur and Eber (24:23–24)

CONCLUSION: BALAAM RETURNS HOMEWARD (24:25)

BALAAM'S COUNSEL: SIN OF THE SECOND GENERATION—THE IDOLATRY AT BAAL PEOR (25:1–19)

Setting of Immorality and Idolatry (25:1–3)
Moses Receives Instruction from Yahweh (25:4)
Moses Instructs the Leaders of Israel (25:5)
Exemplary Action and Faithful Response of Phinehas (25:6–8)
Results of Israel's Immorality (25:9)
Priesthood of Phinehas: Additional Instruction from the Lord (25:10–15)
Instructions Regarding the Midianites (25:16–18)

Setting for the New Generation (25:19)

Constable: Several types of divination were common in the ancient Near East.

1. **Extispicy** was the examination of the entrails of a sacrificed sheep by a trained specialist to determine messages from the gods. The intricate arrangements of the internal organs are what believers in this form of divination regarded as indicative of divine revelation.
2. **Astrology** studied the arrangements of the moon, sun, meteors, planets, and fixed stars to discover the future. Eclipses were particularly significant.
3. **Augury** was the study of the appearance, movements, and behavior of birds. The seers supposed the direction and manner of flight of birds was revelatory.
4. **Kleromancy** was divination by means of lots. The various configurations of symbolic objects, actors, and areas yielded a binary ("yes" or "no") answer to a given question.
5. **Oneiromancy** was revelation by dreams that sometimes contained verbal communication from a god or non-verbal communication. In the latter type certain colors, animals, or activities corresponded to types of misfortune, happiness, or success.

In all the types of divination, fortunetellers used tricks to deceive and impress their clients. They often clothed their predictions in mysterious ambiguous language to cover possible error. Devout Israelites were to reject divination as a way of discovering the likely outcome of events and to rely on God to make known what He wanted them to know.

Peter Wallace: We have our own temptations today to try to manipulate God. We think,

- "if I'm good, then God will give me what I want!"
- Or, "if I get enough people to pray for me, then God will give me what I want!"
- Or, "if I get the pastor to pray for me..."
- Or, "if I give 10%, then God will be happy with me."

That's all magical thinking. And the fundamental problem with all of it is that all of it is focused on me and what I want. **Psalm 37:4** says, "*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*" At first it sounds like it's giving to magical thinking – "*he will give you the desires of your heart.*" Woo-hoo! I can get whatever I want! What was that again? What do I have to do? "*Delight yourself in the LORD.*" Find your delight – your joy – your happiness – in him. If you do that, then you will find that you have all the desires of your heart – **because you have him!**

Bob Deffinbaugh – Balaam Part 1

One might reason that because the Israelites had slain all the Amorites, this is what they were going to do to the Moabites as well. This might explain why the Moabites are so fearful about the coming of the Israelites. And yet, to be fearful of the approach of the

Israelites as life-threatening, the Moabites would have to be ignorant of the special privileges God had established for them as the descendants of Lot. If the Moabites actually feared that they were going to be slaughtered by the Israelites, we would expect them to say as much. But as we look more closely at the words of **verses 4-6**, this does not appear to be what the Moabites feared.

From the Moabites' own words, we would have to conclude that their fears were **economic**. They call attention to the large number of Israelites who are approaching. They do not mention war, nor slaughter. They speak of the Israelites coming near to them and settling down alongside them. They are concerned that the Israelites will consume all the natural resources of the land, leaving less for themselves: "*Now this mass of people will lick up everything around us, as the bull devours the grass of the field*" (verse 4). This sounds a great deal like the basis for the conflict between the herdsmen of their ancient ancestors, Abraham and Lot:

*5 Now Lot, who was traveling with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents.
6 But the land could not support their living together, for their possessions were great, and they were not able to live together. 7 So there was strife between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. Now the Canaanites and the Perizzites were living in the land at that time (Genesis 13:5-7).*

Israel was to be a source of blessing to the world, and certainly to the Moabites. And yet the Moabites feared the presence of the Israelites, so much so that they were willing to hire a man like Balaam to put a curse on them. Their aim was to somehow weaken this great nation by cursing them, so that they would be able to defeat them and "*drive them out of the land.*"

To accomplish this, the Moabites formed an alliance with the Midianites, thinking, perhaps, that there would be strength in numbers (or perhaps merely wanting to spread out the cost of hiring a high-priced "consultant" like Balaam). The Midianites were also somewhat related to the Israelites in a back-handed fashion. Midian was one of the sons of Abraham, through Keturah (**Genesis 25:1-5**). Also, when Moses fled from Egypt, he settled down in the land of Midian, where he married the daughter of a Midianite priest and had two sons (see **Exodus 2:15ff.; Acts 7:29**). Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, is the Midianite who gave Moses some very helpful administrative advice (**Exodus 18**).

The Moabites and the Midianites conspired together to recruit a man who had connections with the spiritual underworld, and who could therefore arrange to have a curse put on the Israelites. No doubt diviners were plentiful in those days, but there seemed to be one man who was "tops in his field." His name was Balaam, and he was from Pethor, a city located along the Euphrates River.

TEXT: Numbers 22:22-41

TITLE: *PERCEPTION AND PROTECTION VIA A DUMB DONKEY*

BIG IDEA:

THE OPPORTUNISTIC PROPHET OF IMPURE MOTIVES RECEIVES EMBARRASSING PERCEPTION AND PROTECTION FROM HIS DUMB DONKEY

INTRODUCTION:

This story is best known from being acted out in children's Sunday School classes. Everybody loves a talking donkey! What an embarrassment to the seer that he was so blind to God's presence that he needed to receive insight and protection from his donkey. His impure motives and longing for worldly riches tainted his spiritual perception. In his heart he hoped that God would change His mind and allow him to curse Israel and receive the bounty promised by Balak. God demonstrated His sovereignty in protecting His people and using even a dumb donkey as an instrument to rebuke the unprincipled prophet.

Gordon Wenham: The ass was caught three times between the angel's sword and Balaam's stick. Soon Balaam will find himself trapped three times between Balak's demands and God's prohibitions. Through his third encounter with God, Balaam was reminded that God wields a sword and that disobedience means death. So he goes on his way fully committed to declaring God's words rather than submitting to Balak's wishes (35).

Raymond Brown: The animal had never spoken before and would never do so again. She too was an instrument in the hand of God. It was the Lord who opened both the dumb donkey's mouth (22:28) and the blind seer's eyes (22:31). By means of this brilliant story, the Lord presented his people with an encouraging message and some great doctrinal truths. A series of fine theological propositions, however lofty and inspiring, might decay in the dust, but the story of an eloquent donkey would endure forever. She plays a role in a greater drama than anything the most ambitious donkey might begin to imagine.

When God wants to announce great themes, influence multitudes, change lives and shape destinies, he will use whoever and whatever he wishes—a pagan king, a greedy soothsayer, even a voiceless donkey. This compelling narrative is not about what human beings plan but what God achieves. In the unfolding of his will he can use anything or anybody to achieve his righteous ends.

Faithlife Sermons: "When the Lord has clearly revealed his will to us, our role is to accept and follow it, not...asking for a second opinion." [Roy Gane] If we rebel, God will orchestrate events to bring us back into His will; some of which, could be painful. We also see in Balaam that deliberate sin can blind us to spiritual realities, often to the

harm of those around us.

J. Ligon Duncan: God can use a donkey if He wants to. God can use a donkey to prophesy if He wishes. The truth of God's word is not dependent upon our esteem of the messenger. God will sometimes use messengers to bring a message whose persons or character seem incongruent with the message and the majesty of God. Isn't that what we learn in verses 28-30 as this donkey starts talking some common sense? Some common sense that Balaam really needs to understand and implement himself? The donkey is an instrument of the Lord, and God can use a donkey if He wants to.

(:22) PROLOGUE – BALAAM BLINDLY FOLLOWING IMPURE MOTIVES

A. Impure Motives Anger God

“But God was angry because he was going,”

Charlie Garret: *“and burned the nostril of God.”* It is as if fire shot out of His nose over the events taking place. It is curious that Balaam had been given permission to go, but that now God's anger is fired up over his going. However, it is apparent, even if not explicitly stated, that the intent by going was to curse Israel. That is why the emissaries had been sent.

MacArthur: Even though God had given Balaam permission to go (v. 20), He knew that his motive was not right. Thus the anger of the Lord burned against Balaam because God knew that he was not yet submissive to what He required.

Faithlife Sermons: Rabbinical tradition teaches that secretly Balaam hopes in his heart that God will eventually allow him to curse the people of Israel. Because of his rebellious heart and attitude, God is angry.

B. Impure Motives Cause God to Stand against You

“and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as an adversary against him.”

Eugene Merrill: The Angel of the Lord was a manifestation of the presence of the Lord Himself, that is, He was a theophany. This is clear from the fact that He frequently was equated with Deity and that He was offered and accepted worship, something absolutely forbidden to ordinary angels.

Charlie Garrett: The word *satan*, or adversary, is introduced into the Bible here. It is one who opposes or an accuser. When it is prefixed by the definite article, it speaks of Satan, the arch-enemy of God.

Here, it is *malak Yehovah*, or *“the Angel of the Lord,”* meaning the eternal Christ, who stands in opposition to Balaam.

C. Impure Motives Have an Unimpressive Supporting Cast

“Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him.”

I. (:23-27) OPENING THE EYES OF THE DONKEY – DONKEY SEES THE DANGER -- THREE STRIKES AND YOU ARE OUT

A. (:23) Drawn Sword – Alternate Path -- Donkey Goes Into the Field – First Strike

“When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand, the donkey turned off from the way and went into the field; but Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back into the way.”

B. (:24-25) Restraining Wall – Avoidance -- Donkey Rubs Against the Wall – Second Strike

“Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. 25 When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pressed herself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall, so he struck her again.”

Charlie Garrett: Thus, this is probably a dividing line between two independent vineyards that people would travel through. On each side would be a *gader*, or wall. It is another new word signifying a wall or a fence. This was probably of stone which was cleared from fields and used to mark the edge of the property. This would make passage limited.

C. (:26-27) Narrow Space – Acquiescence -- Donkey Lies Down – Third Strike

“And the angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. 27 When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick.”

Charlie Garrett: “and burned the nostril of Balaam.” It is the same words used above when speaking about the anger of the Lord. The number three in Scripture signifies that which is substantial, complete and entire. The Lord has taken Balaam through the entire course of events in order to alert him to the severity of the situation.

II. (:28-30) OPENING THE MOUTH OF THE DONKEY – DONKEY REBUKES BALAAM

A. (:28) Donkey Protests the Undeserved Beating

“And the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, ‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’”

Who is really the jackass in this scenario?

Timothy Ashley: The same phrase is used of opening a prophet's mouth in **Ezek. 3:27; 33:22**. Since speaking animals were apparently unusual in Israel, the narrator makes it clear that this is an act of Yahweh himself. To discuss whether donkeys have sufficient vocal cords to speak overlooks the fact that this is an act of Almighty Yahweh. The question of how the donkey could speak does not concern the narrator.

B. (:29) Balaam Responds in Blind Arrogance – Unaware of the Danger

“Then Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a mockery of me! If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now.’”

Charlie Garrett: The word Balaam uses, and which is translated as “abused,” signifies “to go over completely.” It is what one does when he gleans. He goes over an area until it is picked clean. Balaam says, in essence, “You have completely derided me.”

C. (:30) Donkey Reasons on the Basis of His Faithful Service

“And the donkey said to Balaam, ‘Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been accustomed to do so to you?’ And he said, ‘No.’”

III. (:31-35) OPENING THE EYES OF BALAAM – LORD REBUKES BALAAM

A. (:31) AHA Moment for Balaam

1. Balaam Now Sees the Danger

“Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way with his drawn sword in his hand;”

2. Response of Humiliation and Fear

“and he bowed all the way to the ground.”

B. (:32-33) Argumentation Supporting Rebuke by the Angel of the Lord

1. (:32a) Irrationality of Undeserved Beating

“And the angel of the LORD said to him, ‘Why have you struck your donkey these three times?’”

2. (:32b) Imminent Danger Due to Rebellion

“Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me.”

3. (:33) Intervention by the Donkey Saved Balaam's Life

“But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live.”

C. (:34) Apology that Lacks Conviction

1. Pleading Ignorance of the Lord's Opposition

*"And Balaam said to the angel of the LORD,
'I have sinned,
for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me.'"*

Wiersbe: His words, "*I have sinned,*" were not evidence of sincere repentance. Pharaoh (Ex. 9:27), King Saul (1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21), and Judas Iscariot (Matt. 27:4) all uttered these words but didn't turn to God for mercy. What good is it to say pious words if your heart goes right on sinning? Listen to David (2 Sam. 12:13; Ps. 54:4; 2 Sam. 24:10, 17; 1 Chron. 21:8, 17) or the Prodigal Son if you want to hear real confession.

2. Protesting that He does not Wish to Displease the Lord

"Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back."

Timothy Ashley: The same phrase is used of opening a prophet's mouth in Ezek. 3:27; 33:22. Since speaking animals were apparently unusual in Israel, the narrator makes it clear that this is an act of Yahweh himself. To discuss whether donkeys have sufficient vocal cords to speak overlooks the fact that this is an act of Almighty Yahweh. The question of how the donkey could speak does not concern the narrator.

D. (:35) Acquiescence with Restriction

*"But the angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men,
but you shall speak only the word which I shall tell you.'
So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak."*

IV. (:36-41) LEADING BALAAM TO THE POINT OF TEMPTATION – BALAK PREPARES TO SEEK A CURSE ON ISRAEL FROM BALAAM

A. (:36) Rendezvous of Impatience on the Part of Balak

"When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border."

Charlie Garrett: The king desired to provide a true state visit for Balaam, and so instead of awaiting him to come to his location, he went to the extremity of his territory to meet with him. It shows the importance of the matter to the king. He is anxious to give Balaam great honor in hopes that he will accept it and act in the most favorable manner concerning the situation with Israel.

B. (:37) Reproach for Hesitancy on the Part of Balaam

*"Then Balak said to Balaam, 'Did I not urgently send to you to call you?
Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?'"*

C. (:38) Reminder of Constraints on the Prophecy on the Part of Balaam

"So Balaam said to Balak, 'Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak

anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak.”

Iain Duguid: It is striking that it was at this point in the story, after he arrived in Moab humbled after the incident with the donkey and reminded that he was not an independent agent, Balaam finally said the words to Balak that he earlier failed to say to his envoys. When Balak asked him why he did not come when the king summoned him (v. 37; the same Hebrew word as before) and said, “*Am I not able to honor you?*” Balaam replied, “*Behold, I have come to you! Have I now any power of my own to speak anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak*” (v. 38). By this point Balaam had, however reluctantly, learned his lesson. Balak had neither the authority to summon him nor the ability to reward him sufficiently to achieve what he wanted. Balaam may not have been happy about this turn of events, as the terseness of his reply to Balak perhaps makes evident, but he recognized that he was not a free agent in this matter. He could only say the words the Lord commanded him to say.

D. (:39-41) Recording of the Preparations for Prophecy

1. (:39) Impressive Site

“And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth.”

2. (:40) Impressive Sacrifice

“And Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent some to Balaam and the leaders who were with him.”

Timothy Ashley: We are probably safest in concluding that these sacrifices were meant to be a kind of welcome for Balaam. Whether they were intended to be thanksgivings for his safe arrival or to seek the good offices of Balak’s gods is not known.

3. (:41) Impressive Staging

“Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam, and brought him up to the high places of Baal; and he saw from there a portion of the people.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How does this passage give us assurance that God will accomplish victory in our lives – whatever the opposition?
- 2) What are the applications for evangelism regarding how the Lord must be the one to open the ears and eyes and hearts and understanding of those blinded by sin?
- 3) When are we obstinate on the inside even though our outward actions may look like we are embracing the will of God?

4) What unusual events or props has God used in your life to accomplish His will and guide you on His path for you?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Ronald Allen: The internationally known seer is blind before the angel of the Lord, but his proverbially dumb beast is able to see the spiritual reality of the living God on the path. Balaam as a *baru* prophet was a specialist in animal divination. Here his animal saw what he was blind to observe. . .

The story is one of studied ridicule. We see the prophet Balaam as a blind seer, seeing less than the dumb animal. In this graphic representation of Balaam pitted against the donkey, we also see a more important contrast, as **Goldberg** avers, the contrast of Balaam and Moses. . . Moses spoke face to face with God (see **ch. 12**); Balaam does not even know that God is near – but his donkey does!

This section is the ultimate in polemics against paganism. It is well known that the ass has been depicted from the earliest times as a subject of stupidity and contrariness. Yet here the “stupid” ass sees the angel of the Lord and attempts to protect her rider from God’s drawn sword. Three times the hapless Balaam beat his donkey. . .

It is just an amazingly humorous way to humiliate the prophet Balaam. Before the Lord revealed himself to Balaam, he first “got his attention” in this dramatic fashion. Balaam had to learn from a donkey before he could learn from God. This is one of the most amusing stories in the Bible.

R. K. Harrison: Threefold repetition is a structural device in this section of Numbers. Thus the donkey tried to evade the angel three times (**vv. 23, 25, 27**), whereas Balaam had three meetings with God before finally arriving at Moab (**vv. 12, 20, 22-35**). In **chap. 23** Balaam requested three sacrifices before speaking his oracles (**vv. 1, 14, 29**). Furthermore, the entire story of Balaam can be divided into two main sections (**22:7-35; 22:36 – 24:25**) consisting of three parts each (**22:7-14, 15-20, 21-35**, matched by **22:36 – 23:12, 23:13-26, 23:27 – 24:25**). In each case God insists that Balaam should speak only what He commands. The whole narrative is presented in such a way as to cover three pairs of consecutive days with unrecorded intervals of time. By any standards this non-Israelite material has been assembled in a sophisticated interconnecting pattern that bespeaks an advanced and sensitive literary culture.

Iain Duguid: What is remarkable about this scene is Balaam’s blindness and impotence. Here is a man who is a professional seer, the kind of person who makes a living discerning messages from God in places where other people see only random tea leaves and miscellaneous flights of birds; yet he cannot see the angel of the Lord when he stands there in plain sight in front of him! His donkey can see the Lord’s messenger, but Balaam cannot. Moreover, here is a man who has been hired to travel some distance in

order to harm an entire nation—Israel—with the mere power of his spoken word; yet when a simple donkey makes a fool out of him, he is reduced to beating her with a stick and uttering empty threats. He has no power to curse her by turning her into a frog or a pumpkin! The world famous super-prophet is both spiritually blind and unable to inflict harm, while a mere donkey whose mouth has been opened by the Lord is able to see the truth clearly and speak it out in a way that delivers from death. The scene forms a wonderfully humorous picture.

Brueggemann: With the power struggle between Balaam and God settled on the side of God's controlling things, a new power struggle began. King Balak took offense at Balaam's cavalier attitude toward the royal summons and financial offers: "*Why didn't you come right away?*" (22:37). Balaam retorted, "*Look, now, I have come,*" then got down to business: "*I will speak only the message that God puts in my mouth*" (22:38). Balak should have immediately cancelled the contract when he first heard that vital stipulation. Balaam kept insisting that he was a seer who could recite only what the Lord gave him to say, but Balak kept hoping that Balaam might function as a sorcerer, hatching up effective curses that could force the hand of the gods.

Nonetheless, Balaam accompanied Balak and accepted his sacrificial offers of hospitality, which he probably saw as a wonderful start in the direction of greater rewards (22:39–40). Unlike the sacrifices that Balaam later mandated as part of his divining rites, the sacrifice served the purposes of hospitality more than the purposes of religion. . . . Then Balak took Balaam to one of his cultic high places to give him a vantage point for doing his curse business. In case the whole majestic camp of Israel might put Balaam off, Balak showed Balaam only "*some of the people of Israel*" (22:41).

Charlie Garrett: After studying this first chapter in detail, it becomes evident that he was, in fact, an **opportunist** who held Yehovah as simply one God among many. His sitting down to a meal sacrificed by the king of Moab, knowing that he would have done so to Chemosh, reflects this as much as anything else which has been presented. He may have desired to only speak what Elohim told him to speak, but Elohim is a very large word which conveys many meanings in Scripture. In Balaam's case, it was most certainly a collection of gods who were there to help him become wealthy.

Unfortunately, we are all susceptible to following after "*the gods,*" of this world which are led by the "*god*" of this world, meaning the devil. Money, addictions to sex, drugs, fame, or whatever else, even lesser gods of chance, luck, and fortune, and so on. The world is filled with "*gods,*" but we are told to reject them, because they all belong to one ruler, Satan.

Instead, we are to stand opposed to them and to proclaim that there is one, and only one true God, and that God – the Creator – has revealed Himself to us in the person and work of Jesus Christ. May we set our hearts and affections on Him, and let us pursue Him and Him alone – to the glory of God the Father.

TEXT: Numbers 23:1 – 24:25

TITLE: *THE MESSIANIC KING AND HIS KINGDOM WILL PREVAIL*

BIG IDEA:

ENEMY OPPOSITION CANNOT UNDERMINE GOD'S PROMISED BLESSING ON HIS CHOSEN, CONQUERING, COVENANT PEOPLE

INTRODUCTION:

Balak enlists the prophetic word of the famous seer Balaam to curse God's people and undermine God's kingdom agenda. But the covenant-keeping God is immutable and committed to His promises to bless Israel. All of the promises made in Genesis to the patriarchs will be fulfilled in perfect detail. As the nation prepares to enter the promised land, they can be assured of God's future blessing and His ultimate destruction of their enemies. The fundamental prophetic principle will be proven throughout history – God will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel.

Constable: In summary, the first three oracles were a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic promises to Israel and a testimony to their partial fulfillment thus far in Israel's history.

Oracle1: seed promise **(Numbers 23:10)**

Oracle2: land promise **(Numbers 23:24)**

Oracle3: blessing promise **(Numbers 24:9)**

In each case the allusion to the promise concludes these oracles. The writer showed that God's promise to bless those nations that blessed Abraham's descendants and curse those who cursed them was reliable. The key to the future prosperity of Israel's neighbor nations was their treatment of God's chosen people.

The fourth through seventh oracles differ from the others in that they looked farther down the corridors of time. They prophesied the success of Israel in the years ahead culminating in Israel's ultimate glory under her great Messiah's reign.

Iain Duguid: In dramatic contrast to the expensive, uncertain, and ultimately impotent search for blessing and curse through spiritual counterfeits and the idols of our hearts, there is the free, certain, and effective way to blessing through Israel's God. Israel did not have to pay Balaam or offer special sacrifices to receive a word of blessing from the Lord through him. On the contrary, the Lord had already freely committed himself in advance to bless Abraham and his descendants (**Genesis 12:2, 3**). The Lord had already told the Aaronic priests to pronounce his blessing regularly on the people, without any fee changing hands (**Numbers 6:24–27**). Balaam's words of blessing were simply a reflection of the Lord's settled attitude toward his people.

I. (:1-12) BALAAM'S FIRST ORACLE – ISRAEL AS A CHOSEN PEOPLE BLESSED BY A SOVEREIGN KING

A. (:1-4) Preparation for the Oracle

1. (:1-2) Preparation Involving Sacrifices

a. (:1) Preparation for Sacrifices

“Then Balaam said to Balak, ‘Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.’”

Peter Wallace: Balaam is a **celebrity convert!** We should listen to this Balaam guy! Now, in Pergamum, the guy’s name was plainly not Balaam. Maybe his name was Nicolaus (the Nicolaitans). Or maybe his name was Simon Magus! But Jesus’ point is that you shouldn’t pay attention to someone just because they have a fancy conversion story. They may be able to produce a big splashy show – all in the name of Jesus (just like Balaam was able to make quite a showing in the name of Yahweh) – but this is why Paul came to Corinth in **weakness** – not with a big show of **worldly wisdom**. The message of the gospel will invariably be centered on the **cross**. And the messenger will probably not be splashy. But the result of the message of the cross will be lives that are conformed to the cross! . . .

Balaam claims to have access to the divine council. But Balaam is still operating as a pagan seer – he still thinks that he can manipulate the deities. Only when he is riding his donkey does he come to see otherwise! . . . Ancient Jewish and Christian commentators were quick to point out that the most powerful Gentile prophet appears in parallel with the most powerful Hebrew prophet. Balaam and Moses need to be seen side-by-side. The pagan way of manipulating the gods by incantations needs to be shown for what it is – feeble and foolish. The wisdom of this age – and the rulers of this age – are displayed in all their folly.

b. (:2) Offering of Sacrifices

“And Balak did just as Balaam had spoken, and Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.”

Gordon Wenham: In Israel seven was also a sacred number. Sevenfold sprinkling was required in rites of purification (**Lev. 8:11; 14:7, 16; 16:14, 19**, etc.). Creation took seven days (**Gen. 1:1–2:3**). The seventh month of the year was full of religious festivals (**Num. 29**). The seventh year and the fiftieth year ($7 \times 7 + 1$) were also of special significance (**Lev. 25**). Seven or fourteen lambs were offered at the major festivals (**Num. 28:19, 27; 29:4, 13, 17ff.**). The choice of bulls and rams also enhanced the prestige of Balaam’s offerings, for they were the most valued sacrificial beasts of ancient Israel (**Lev. 4:1–21; 5:14–6:7**). They were offered as burnt offerings, a sacrifice in which the entire animal was burnt on the altar (**Lev. 1**). Unlike the other sacrifices, neither offerer nor priest had any share in eating a burnt offering: it was all given to God. By selecting fourteen of the most valuable animals and offering them in this way, Balaam and Balak were evidently doing their utmost to secure a favourable response from God.

3–6. The religious atmosphere is further heightened by Balaam. He tells Balak: Stand beside your burnt offering. The verb used here (*hityaššeb*) echoes **22:22** and suggests a patient waiting for God, possibly in prayer (cf. **Exod. 14:13; 1 Sam. 12:7, 16**). Balaam

himself goes to a bare height, (12) where he evidently hoped to meet with God. Some commentators surmise that such places were considered especially favourable for divination. Balaam's hopes were realized, God met Balaam. Once again the narrator underlines the inspiration of the oracle he is about to deliver, the Lord put a word in Balaam's mouth (23:5; cf. 22:20, 28, 35, 38).

2. (:3-4) Preparation Involving Soliciting God's Revelation

a. (:3) Seeking a Meeting with God

"Then Balaam said to Balak, 'Stand beside your burnt offering, and I will go; perhaps the LORD will come to meet me, and whatever He shows me I will tell you.' So he went to a bare hill."

b. (:4) Significance of the Sacrifices

"Now God met Balaam, and he said to Him, 'I have set up the seven altars, and I have offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.'"

B. (:5-10) Delivery of the Oracle – the Seed Promise

1. (:5-6) Prophetic Charge

"Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth and said, 'Return to Balak, and you shall speak thus.' So he returned to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt offering, he and all the leaders of Moab."

2. (:7-10) Prophetic Content

"And he took up his discourse and said,"

David Thompson: Then God led Balaam to talk to them and he gave them six opening messages:

- 1) Balak brought me from Aram from the east to curse Jacob and denounce Israel. **23:7**
- 2) I cannot curse what God does not curse. **23:8a**
- 3) I cannot denounce what God does not denounce. **23:8b**
- 4) God has shown me that His people are separate from all other nations. **23:9**
- 5) God has given this nation His multiplication blessing. **23:10a**
- 6) When I die, I would like to have their upright status. **23:10b**

a. (:7) Mission of Balaam to Curse Israel

"From Aram Balak has brought me, Moab's king from the mountains of the East, 'Come curse Jacob for me, And come, denounce Israel!'"

b. (:8) Restriction on Balaam Against Cursing Israel

*"How shall I curse, whom God has not cursed?
And how can I denounce, whom the LORD has not denounced?"*

c. (:9-10) Perspective of Balaam Regarding God's Blessing on Israel
"As I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people who dwells apart, And shall not be reckoned among the nations. 10 Who can count the dust of Jacob, Or number the fourth part of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright, And let my end be like his!"

- Uniqueness of the Elect Nation
- Innumerable posterity
- Envidable status

Timothy Ashley: Israel's **aloneness** consists in its special relationship with Yahweh. Balaam asserts that this nation is alone and is aware of this aloneness.

Wiersbe: Israel's great temptation was in wanting to be like the other nations, and this is what led to their downfall and captivity. Instead of rejoicing in their uniqueness as the people of the true and living God they imitated their neighbors in their worship and conduct, and God had to discipline them. Instead of letting God rule as their King, they asked for a king *"like all the nations"* (1 Sam. 8:5), and this brought the nation into all kinds of trouble.

C. (:11-12) Response to the Oracle

1. (:11) Response of Balak

"Then Balak said to Balaam, 'What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have actually blessed them!'"

Gordon Wenham: Balaam's affirmation of Israel's unique place in God's providence was not what Balak wanted. In comparison with the subsequent oracles, this first one is quite obscure in detailing the way in which God is helping Israel; but it revealed clearly enough that the Lord was backing Israel, not Moab. This enraged Balak.

Timothy Ashley: **M. Moore** has seen in the clash between Balak and Balaam here a fundamental difference in role expectation. Balaam sees his own role primarily as a reciter of divine oracles. Balak, on the other hand, sees the role of Balaam as a sorcerer who will simply incant a spell to curse the Israelites. The tension is not resolved, here or later, and the whole enterprise comes to nothing but a negative outcome for Balak and Balaam.

Dennis Cole: Balak's furious response came as expected, since he as the king of Moab had spent so much time and money personally working toward the desired end of condemning Israel to destruction. He took Balaam's actions and words as a personal

and professional affront, yet his words express the reality of the situation. God will accomplish the reversal of fortunes for any who would try to destroy his people.

2. (:12) Response of Balaam

“And he answered and said, ‘Must I not be careful to speak what the LORD puts in my mouth?’”

II. (:13-26) BALAAM’S SECOND ORACLE – ISRAEL AS A CONQUERING PEOPLE BLESSED BY A VICTORIOUS KING

A. (:13-15) Preparation for the Oracle

1. (:13) Preparation Redirected to a Second Location

“Then Balak said to him, ‘Please come with me to another place from where you may see them, although you will only see the extreme end of them, and will not see all of them; and curse them for me from there.’”

Constable: Balak became disappointed and angry because he expected that Balaam would control the gods. Balaam acknowledged that the God of Israel controlled him. Balak concluded that the site was not conducive to his purpose, so he took Balaam to another place hoping that the spirits might be more favorable there.

2. (:14) Preparation Involving Sacrifices

“So he took him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars and offered a bull and a ram on each altar.”

Wiersbe: The fact that Balaam participated in these pagan occult rituals shows the wickedness of his heart. He spoke the Word of God and longed for a righteous death, yet he thought nothing of using enchantments and consorting with Satan (**Num. 24:1**). He was a double-minded man whose chief desire was to make as much money as possible by marketing his skills.

3. (:15) Preparation Involving Soliciting God’s Revelation

“And he said to Balak, ‘Stand here beside your burnt offering, while I myself meet the Lord yonder.’”

Gordon Wenham: Undeterred by the initial setback, Balak insists on trying again. Perhaps another set of sacrifices at another site will produce different results (**13–14**; cf. **22:41–23:3**). He chooses the field of Zophim (literally ‘watchmen’) on the top of Pisgah. The name suggests it was a watchpost for observing troop movements in the Jordan valley. At least Balaam could see some of the Israelites from there. On another peak of the Pisgah range, Mount Nebo, Moses had a vision of the whole land of Canaan that Israel was to occupy (**Deut. 34**). The whole rigmarole of sacrifice and sign-seeking is repeated and once again the Lord met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth.

B. (:16-24) Delivery of the Oracle – the Land Promise

1. (:16-17) Prophetic Charge

*“Then the LORD met Balaam and put a word in his mouth and said, ‘Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak.’
And he came to him, and behold, he was standing beside his burnt*

*offering, and the leaders of Moab with him. And Balak said to him,
'What has the LORD spoken?'"*

2. (:18-24) Prophetic Content

"Then he took up his discourse and said,"

David Thompson: 13 Messages:

Message #1 - Balak, you need to listen to the Word of God. **23:18**

Message #2 - God is not a Person who will lie. **23:19a**

Message #3 - God is not a Person who will repent of what He says He will do. **23:19b**

Message #4 - When God says He will do something, He will do it. **23:19c**

Message #5 - When God speaks something, He will make it good. **23:19d**

Message #6 - When God gives a command to bless something, no man can revoke it.
23:20

Message #7 - God does not look on Israel in a way to bring trouble or misfortune.
23:21a

Message #8 - God is with Israel and He is their King Warrior. **23:21b**

Message #9 - God brings His people out of bondage. **23:22a**

Message #10 - God is for Israel and He protects Israel like the horns of a wild ox.
23:22b

Message #11 - God will not permit anything Satanic or demonic to destroy Israel.
23:23a

Message #12 - God will fulfill everything He has promised to Israel at the proper time.
23:23b

Message #13 - God will one day reverse things for Israel and she will be a lion who will
destroy her enemies. **23:24**

a. (:18-19) Argument Based on the **Immutability of God**

1) (:18) Character of Balak

"Arise, O Balak, and hear;

Give ear to me, O son of Zippor!"

2) (:19) Character of God

*"God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man,
that He should repent;*

Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

Timothy Ashley: Of the many predications that could have been chosen here, that he should fail points to a very basic distinction between the Creator and a creature. Although the translation *lie* is common, the context shows that the primary thought is not that God does not utter untruths, but that his purposes are utterly true and reliable, and that his nature does not disappoint or fail, as is the case with human creatures.

R. K. Harrison: Balaam began by informing Balak that Israel's God is a morally consistent Being whose nature it is to fulfill His promises. Because Balaam had been instructed to bless Israel, he had no choice but to obey, if only because it was impossible for him to reverse God's decisions.

MacArthur: **A divine intention is not an unchangeable divine decree.** Decrees or sworn declarations (cf. **Ge 22:16–18; Ps 110:4**) or categorical statements of not changing or relenting (cf. **Jer 4:28; Eze 24:14; Zec 8:14, 15**) are **unconditional** and bind the speaker to the stated course of action regardless of the circumstances or reactions of the listeners. **Intentions** retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action (cf. **Jer 15:6; 18:8–10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13; Jon 3:9, 10; 4:2**).

b. (:20-21a) Argument Based on **Irrevocable Nature of God's Blessing**

1) (:20) Nobody Can Alter God's Commitment to Bless
*"Behold, I have received a command to bless;
When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it."*

2) (:21a) God's Vision for the Future of Israel is Not Calamity
*"He has not observed misfortune in Jacob;
Nor has He seen trouble in Israel;"*

Constable: This oracle, as the first, began with a criticism of Balak's theological assumption that people can manipulate God. In this oracle Balaam saw Israel blessed and God as King walking among His people (**Numbers 23:21**). The Exodus was the supreme example of God's care for Israel (**Numbers 23:22**). Israel's future would be bright just as her past had been (**Numbers 23:23-24**). Balaam also alluded to Israel's possession of the land as God had promised Abraham (**Numbers 23:26**).

c. (:21a-24) Argument Based on **Immanent Powerful Presence of God** Guaranteeing Victory to Israel

1) (:21a) Powerful Presence of God with Israel
*"The LORD his God is with him,
And the shout of a king is among them."*

Gordon Wenham: Here Balaam goes much further than in his first vision. Israel is not merely blessed, but enjoys the very presence of God walking among them. The Lord is Israel's king and they acclaim his presence in their worship: the shout of a king is among them. Shout (*těrú 'á*) often denotes the sound of a trumpet blown in war or at religious festivals (e.g. **Lev. 23:24; Num. 10:5–6; 1 Sam. 4:6**), and the word here may allude to such occasions. The notion of the Lord as king is fundamental in the Pentateuch. It is as Israel's sovereign that the Lord made a covenant with her and gave her the law. But he was no distant emperor: he lived and reigned among them. The tabernacle was set up to be a portable palace, with the ark as God's throne. The camp in the wilderness was organized on the model of the Egyptian army with the companies encamped in square formation around the royal tent at the centre.

Eugene Merrill: The shout of the King must be understood as a militaristic threat, implying that the Lord is a Warrior who leads His hosts to victory (cf. **Josh. 6:5, 20; Ps. 47:5; Jer. 4:19; 49:2**). Such power renders sorcery and divination harmless. All that remains is for the nations to look on Israel and marvel at God's protecting grace (**Num. 23:23**).

2) (:22) Powerful Providence of God Delivering Israel
*“God brings them out of Egypt,
He is for them like the horns of the wild ox.”*

Dennis Cole: What set Israel apart was not their population, their power, or their perseverance in the wilderness over the past forty years; what set Israel apart was their God. The statement that Yahweh God is with his people means that no form of opposition can overcome them. He was their invincible King and Warrior, who demonstrated his royal nature by delivering his people from bondage to one of the most powerful nations in the ancient Near East.

3) (:23a) Impotent Opposition to Israel
*“For there is no omen against Jacob,
Nor is there any divination against Israel;”*

R. K. Harrison: The message of the seer appears to be that no kind of magic has any place, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, in the life of the Israelite people. All other nations had recourse to spells, incantations, and other forms of the magical arts. In the light of his own experiences as a *qosem*, Balaam could make this assertion with confidence. He knew that, for the Israelites, the living God of Sinai was the nation's strength and that therefore sorcery and incantation were unnecessary. A renowned ancient Near Eastern prognosticator thus proclaimed in public his conviction that any form of divination is superfluous where God is in control.

4) (:23b) Powerful Testimony to God's Deeds for Israel
*“At the proper time it shall be said to Jacob And to Israel,
what God has done.”*

Wiersbe: It was God who gave Israel their victories, beginning with their exodus from Egypt. The nation was like an ox in its strength and like a lioness and a lion in its determination to catch its prey and kill it. Therefore, no sorcery could succeed against God's people because God was at work in them and through them, "Oh, what God has done!" (23:23, NKJV).

5) (:24) Powerful Conquering of Enemies by Israel
"Behold, a people rises like a lioness, And as a lion it lifts itself; It shall not lie down until it devours the prey, And drinks the blood of the slain."

C. (:25-26) Response to the Oracle

1. (:25) Response of Balak

*"Then Balak said to Balaam,
'Do not curse them at all nor bless them at all!'"*

2. (:26) Response of Balaam

*"But Balaam answered and said to Balak,
'Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the LORD speaks, that I must do '?"*

III. (23:27 – 24:14) BALAAM'S THIRD ORACLE – ISRAEL AS A COVENANT PEOPLE BLESSED BY AN EXALTED KING

A. (23:27-30) Preparation for the Oracle

1. (:27-28) Preparation Redirected to a Third Location

"Then Balak said to Balaam, 'Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will be agreeable with God that you curse them for me from there.'

So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor which overlooks the wasteland."

2. (:29-30) Preparation Involving Sacrifices

"And Balaam said to Balak, 'Build seven altars for me here and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.'

And Balak did just as Balaam had said, and offered up a bull and a ram on each altar."

B. (24:1-24) Delivery of the Oracle – the Blessing Promise

1. (:1-4) Prophetic Charge – Vision from the Spirit of God

"When Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times to seek omens but he set his face toward the wilderness. 2 And Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe; and the Spirit of God came upon him. 3 And he took up his discourse and said, 'The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened; 4 The oracle of him who hears

the words of God, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered, ”

Dennis Cole: The narrative now takes an unusual turn, for Balaam does not depart from Balak and the altars to a place of solitude. He does not perform any divination rituals to prepare for the encounter with the divine, nor does he receive the revelation in the same manner of Yahweh putting the words into his mouth. In this case the Spirit of God came upon the prophet, and he may have entered into an ecstatic trance in the manner of Saul (1 Sam 10:6) or Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:10–23). The process transpired as Balaam lifted up his eyes and saw (*wayyissā' bil'ām 'et- 'ēnāyw wayyar*, i.e., fully focused his attention). The preterite form of the verb *rā'ā* (“he saw”) here and elsewhere is used to denote an individual seeing or observing perceptively. In this case Balaam is endowed with divine insight as he observed the Israelites below him in the wilderness of Moab.

Gordon Wenham: Whereas the first two oracles are theological statements about God’s relationship to Israel and what he has done for them already, the subsequent oracles include visionary predictions of Israel’s future settlement in Canaan, the rise of the monarchy and victories over specific foes.

2. (:5-9a) Prophetic Content

a. (:5-6) Blessing of Luxurious Prosperity and Security

*“How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! 6
Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens beside the river,
Like aloes planted by the LORD, Like cedars beside the waters.”*

b. (:7a) Blessing of Innumerable Prosperity

*“Water shall flow from his buckets,
And his seed shall be by many waters,”*

c. (:7b) Blessing of Exalted King and Kingdom

*“And his king shall be higher than Agag,
And his kingdom shall be exalted.”*

Ronald Allen: The oracles are building in intensity and in their depth of meaning. . . Balaam speaks here in general but luxuriant terms of the blessings that will fall on the people of Israel as they will settle in their new land. The people will have a sense of Eden in the lushness of their blessing from the Lord.

Constable: In an ironic reversal of the evil intended by Pharaoh’s order to cast the seed of Abraham into the river, Balaam’s third oracle uses the well-watered gardens that spread out along the banks of a river to speak of the abundance of Israel’s “seed.” A literal reading of Balaam’s remark in **Numbers 24:7** is “*Their seed is in the abundant waters*” ... Thus what was once the intended means for the destruction of the promised seed, that Isaiah, the “abundant waters,” has now become the poetic image of God’s faithfulness to his promise.” [Note: **Sailhamer**, *The Pentateuch . . .*, p407.]

Gordon Wenham: Here the image is of a man with two pails hanging from his shoulders and overflowing with water. Again water is being used as symbolic of great fruitfulness. Though the reference could again be to the fertility of the land, resulting from the abundance of rain, it more probably refers to a growing population as the result of sexual intercourse (cf. **Prov. 5:15–19**). Though Israel may already be too many to count, Balaam declares they will multiply yet further (cf. **Gen. 17:5–6**).

David Thompson:

Vision #1 - The place where Israel dwells will be a wonderful blessed place. 24:6-7a

Vision #2 - The place where Israel dwells will have the great King who will reign.

24:7b

Vision #3 - Israel will dominate and destroy all enemies because God is on her side.

24:8-9a

Vision #4 - Everyone who blesses Israel will be blessed. **24:9b**

Vision #5 - Everyone who curses Israel will be cursed. **24:9c**

d. (:8-9a) Blessing of Delivering and Devouring Strength

“God brings him out of Egypt, He is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He shall devour the nations who are his adversaries, And shall crush their bones in pieces, And shatter them with his arrows. 9 He couches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him?”

3. (:9b) Prophetic Principle Dictating the Fate of the Nations

*“Blessed is everyone who blesses you,
And cursed is everyone who curses you.”*

C. (24:10-14) Response to the Oracle

1. (:10-11) Response of Balak

a. (:10a) Anger

*“Then Balak’s anger burned against Balaam,
and he struck his hands together;”*

b. (:10b) Rebuke

*“and Balak said to Balaam,
‘I called you to curse my enemies, but behold, you have persisted
in blessing them these three times!’”*

c. (:11a) Threat

“Therefore, flee to your place now.”

d. (:11b) Relegation

*“I said I would honor you greatly,
but behold, the LORD has held you back from honor.”*

2. (:12-14) Response of Balaam

- a. (:12-13) Insistence on Fidelity to Divine Revelation
*“And Balaam said to Balak, ‘Did I not tell your messengers whom you had sent to me, saying, 13 ‘Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything contrary to the command of the LORD, either good or bad, of my own accord. **What the LORD speaks, that I will speak** ?’”*
- b. (:14) Introduction to Final Discourses
“And now behold, I am going to my people; come, and I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the days to come.”

Constable: Before Balaam departed he gave Balak four more revelations from God. They dealt with the future of Israel, Moab, and Israel’s other neighbors. They were entirely futuristic in their prophecies. Each one began with the phrase *"took up his discourse and said."* In all, Balaam made seven discourses that Moses recorded in the text.

The fourth oracle dealt with Israel, Moab, and Edom. Balaam seemed to sense that what he predicted would take place in the distant future: *"I see him, but not now, ..."* (Numbers 24:17). Saul and David partially fulfilled these prophecies. However Jewish and Christian interpreters have seen them as looking beyond the early monarchy to Messiah at His first and second advents.

MacArthur: *“in the days to come”* – Lit. *“at the end of days.”* This term is rightfully used in the OT for the distant future. Balaam’s fourth oracle takes the truth communicated in the third and applies it to Moab.

IV. (24:15-19) BALAAM’S FOURTH ORACLE – MESSIANIC DOMINION

A. (:15-16) Prophetic Charge

*“And he **took up his discourse and said**, ‘The oracle of Balaam the son of Beor, And the oracle of the man whose eye is opened, 16 The oracle of him who hears the words of God, And knows the knowledge of the Most High, Who sees the vision of the Almighty, Falling down, yet having his eyes uncovered.’”*

B. (:17-19) Prophetic Content

1. (:17) Coming Deliverer

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, And a scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth.”

2. (:18-19) Coming Dominion

“And Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also shall be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly. 19 One from Jacob shall have dominion, And shall destroy the remnant from the city.”

Wiersbe: The vision is brief and to the point; it focuses on the coming Messiah of Israel and His conquests “*in the latter days*” (**Num. 24:14**). The images of the star and scepter speak of Messiah’s kingship and reign (**Gen. 49:10; Rev. 22:16**), and “*out of Jacob shall he come who shall have dominion*” certainly refers to Messiah (**Num. 24:19; Ps. 72:8; Zech. 9:10; Rev. 1:6**). While a part of this vision may have been fulfilled in a lesser way in the conquests of David, Jesus the Son of David will fulfill them completely when He returns to conquer His enemies and establish His kingdom on the earth (**Rev. 19:11 – 20:6**).

David Thompson: vv. 15-22

Observation #1 - The prophetic plan is focused on a real man. **24:17a**

There will be some real person identified as “*him*,” a male who will fulfill this.

Observation #2 - The prophetic plan concerning that man is not now. **24:17b**

The plan concerning this special man was not in the immediate present time. In other words, the Person I am talking about is not presently here.

Observation #3 - The prophetic plan concerning that man is not near. **24:17c**

The fulfillment of this prophetic plan would be in the future, but not the immediate future.

Observation #4 - The prophetic plan will focus on One Person who will come from Jacob’s line. **24:17d**

There will be a heavenly star from Jacob’s line who will be here as a man. He will come from heaven but will be a real man in Jacob’s line.

Observation #5 - The prophetic plan will focus on a scepter-ruler who will come from Israel. **24:17e**

A heavenly man king ruler will come from Israel and will dominate the world. We know who this is because God the Father said that this is a reference to Jesus Christ His Son (**Hebrews 1:8**).

Observation #6 - The scepter ruler will crush all of Israel’s enemies. **24:17f**

This not only includes Moab, who is representative of all enemies who curse Israel, but also He will tear down the sons of Seth. We take this to refer to all humanity who hates Israel. Seth was a son of Noah through whom Jesus Christ actually was born (**Luke 3:38**). What I understand this to mean is that the scepter-ruler will destroy any nation or individual who rejects Him and hates Israel. One could be Gentile or Jewish. All enemies will be crushed one day.

Observation #7 - The scepter-ruler will take possession of enemy territory. **24:18a**

People and places who were Israel’s enemies will become Israel’s possessions.

Observation #8 - Israel will perform valiantly. **24:18b**

David wrote a Psalm that described the fact that God had been angry with His people

but then delivered them. He wrote: “*Through God we shall do valiantly, and it is He who will tread down our adversaries*” (**Psalm 60:12**).

Observation #9 - One from Jacob’s line will have total dominion over everything.

24:19a

Isaiah predicted one would come who would have all the government of God on His shoulders, who would be the mighty God (**Isaiah 9:6**). Balaam is seeing the same Person.

Observation #10 - One from Jacob’s line will destroy the enemy remnant from the city.

24:19b

We believe this is a reference to what Jesus Christ will do in Jerusalem. The remnant of unbelievers and enemies of God and Israel will be destroyed.

Observation #11 - In the future, the entire enemy world will be destroyed. **24:20-22**

V. (24:20-24) BALAAM’S FINAL 3 ORACLES – DESTRUCTION OF NEIGHBORING NATIONS

A. (:20) Oracle Regarding Amalek

*“And he looked at Amalek and took up his discourse and said,
‘Amalek was the first of the nations, But his end shall be destruction.’”*

Gordon Wenham: Yet rather unexpectedly Balaam does not end here. He adds three short, cryptic oracles dealing with the fate of other nations. It is difficult to know why they are included, except that they bring up the total of oracles to the mystic number seven and, like the oracles of doom against foreign nations in the later prophets, they serve as a back-handed encouragement to Israel. If Israel’s enemies are destroyed, her future will be secure.

B. (:21-22) Oracle Regarding Kenites

*“And he looked at the Kenite, and took up his discourse and said,
‘Your dwelling place is enduring, And your nest is set in the cliff.
22 Nevertheless Kain shall be consumed;
How long shall Asshur keep you captive?’”*

Wiersbe: The Kenites were a nomadic people who lived among the Midianites. They lived in the mountainous regions, but their “*nest*” wouldn’t protect them from the invading Assyrians (Asshur) who would take them captive. The fate of the nations is in God’s hands (**Acts 17:24-28**), and no nation or individual could survive apart from His mercy (**Num. 24:23**).

C. (:23-24) Oracle Regarding Asshur and Eber

*“And he took up his discourse and said,
‘Alas, who can live except God has ordained it?
24 But ships shall come from the coast of Kittim,*

*And they shall afflict Asshur and shall afflict Eber;
So they also shall come to destruction.”*

Ronald Allen: Balaam now presents his last oracle, one that is more difficult than any of the others to interpret. This may be fitting. The relative obscurity of the words compel attention; clarity may come as the time of the oracle is realized. . . The difficulties that we face in precision in our interpretation of this verse does not obscure the general direction: one nation will rise and supplant another, only to face its own doom. In contrast there is the implied ongoing blessing on the people of Israel and their sure promise of a future deliverer who will have the final victory (vv. 17-19).

Eugene Merrill: Many scholars think that Kittim refers not only to Cyprus specifically but also to all western Mediterranean maritime powers generally, particularly Rome (Jer. 2:10; Ezek. 27:6; Dan. 11:30). This remarkable prophecy found fulfillment in the overthrow of Asshur, which represented Mesopotamia and Persia, and Eber, which was the original name for the Hebrews, or Israelites. Later Rome did indeed incorporate the vestiges of the Assyrian Empire as well as Israel within its universal domination.

Peter Wallace: **Stubbs** summarizes these oracles: “Israel is blessed by God first in its election and fruitfulness. God also blesses through his presence, which cleanses, gives insight, and strengthens. This blessing leads to a life of harmony and prosperity in the promised land. Finally, God’s blessing will include sending the Messiah, who will eventually bring victory over all the enemies of God’s people. Understood in this way, the blessings of Balaam provide an overview of all salvation history.”

Iain Duguid: The greatest declaration of Israel’s future blessing, though, was left for the distant future. In Balaam’s final oracle he announced that a star would come out of Jacob and a scepter out of Israel, a great king who would definitively crush all of her enemies (24:17–19). In that day, pride of place would not be sufficient to keep Israel’s adversaries safe: the Amalekites, who were “*first among the nations*,” would come to ruin (24:20). A secure location would be no defense either: the Kenites would be flushed out of their rocky lair (24:21). Even those whom God used to destroy those nations would themselves ultimately go down in defeat at the hands of others—the Assyrians who would overcome and enslave the Kenites would themselves be subdued in due time by a warlike power from across the sea (24:24). Meanwhile, those who brought low the Assyrians would themselves come to ruin in the end (24:24). Who can endure this great day of the Lord’s wrath (24:23)?

This final oracle thus spans the entire sweep of human history. Nation after nation will rise to world domination and then fall to defeat. But when the messianic King arrives on the scene, no people other than Israel, the nation set apart, will survive the final day of destruction. At the end of all things, when all of human history has played out its course of changing fortunes, the Lord’s people will be the only ones left standing.

(24:25) EPILOGUE – PARTING OF BALAAM AND BALAK

“Then Balaam arose and departed and returned to his place, and Balak also went his way.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What do you learn about Balaam from the NT references to him?
- 2) How enviable do you consider your status as an elect child of God?
- 3) What type of victories has the Lord accomplished in your life?
- 4) How secure are you in the future blessings which God has promised you?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Robert Rayburn: God does not predict the future simply because he can, or to amaze us with his powers. He foretells the future to remind his people that he knows how the story is going to proceed and finally come to its end. He is in control of history and so can bless his people as he has promised. It is to encourage their faith and give them hope and help them, in that way, to remain faithful to him. Biblical prophecy is mostly a broad-brush account of the future such as we have here. And in these accounts the great interest is to confirm the gospel, the Lord’s promises, *and his people’s election*, their special place in his plan and purpose, something we are often tempted to forget: to begin to think as if we are just like everybody else and as if our life, our future, is the same as the life and the future of the people around us. It is not always easy to be a people apart. We want to be the same, not different!

But it was when Israel forgot her election, her belonging to the Lord, the unique future he had promised her, that she ran into her worst trouble, betrayed the covenant God had made with her, and brought his judgment down upon herself. It was when she remembered her election that she belonged to God as no other people did or could, and that he had said very specific things about what was going to happen to her and become of her as the years and ages passed. When she remembered that she walked on the heights of the land.

If you know you belong to the Lord, and you do if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, if you remember that you are a people who live apart and have a glorious future guaranteed to you by the Word of God and proved over and over again in the accuracy and the faithfulness of Biblical prophecy; I say, if you know and remember these things, the fact that your enemies, the fact that the rest of the world has a better reputation, as

the Amalekites did, or a better location, as the Kenites did, or a better record of recent success as the Philistines did, matters not at all.

And if at any point you doubt the place and position in the world of the people of God, you have only to remember that the star *did* arise out of Jacob, the scepter *did* rise out of Israel and now shines that star and rules that scepter over the entire earth. And he who made these promises and has proved them again and again will not, cannot fail to fulfill them finally and completely in due time.

It is a greater thing than we often remember it to be, and a matter of greater consequence, that God predicted events long before they came to pass, that he proved himself the master of the future, that many of the things he said would happen and did happen were utterly unpredictable and unlikely things – such as the salvation of the world by the death of a Jewish man of no worldly consequence – *and* that the great story of the future is the story of the preservation and then finally the triumph of the people God has chosen, among whom are you and I.

Matthew Henry: We have here the conclusion of this vain attempt to curse Israel, and the total abandonment of it.

1. Balak made the worst of it. He broke out into a rage against Balaam (v. 10), expressed both in words and gesture the highest degree of vexation at the disappointment; he smote his hands together, for indignation, to see all his measures thus broken, and his project baffled. He charged Balaam with putting upon him the basest affront and cheat imaginable: "*I called thee to curse my enemies, and thou hast shown thyself in league with them, and in their interests, for thou hast blessed them these three times, though, by appointing the altars to be built and sacrifices to be offered, thou madest me believe thou wouldst certainly curse them.*" Hereupon he forbade him his presence, expelled him his country, upbraided him with the preferments he had designed to bestow upon him, but now would not (v. 11): "*The Lord hath kept thee back from honour. See what thou gettest by pleasing the Lord, instead of pleasing me; thou has hindered thy preferment by it.*" Thus those who are any way losers by their duty are commonly upbraided with it, as fools, for preferring it before their interest in the world. Whereas, if Balaam had been voluntary and sincere in his adherence to the word of the Lord, though he lost the honour Balak designed him by it, God would have made that loss up to him abundantly to his advantage.

2. Balaam made the best of it.

(1.) He endeavours to excuse the disappointment. And a very good excuse he has for it, that God restrained him from saying what he would have said, and constrained him to say what he would not; and that this was what Balak ought not to be displeased at, not only because he could not help it, but because he had told Balak before what he must depend upon, v. 12, v. 13. Balak could not say that he had cheated him, since he had given him fair notice of the check he found himself under.

(2.) He endeavours to atone for it, v. 14. Though he cannot do what Balak would have him do, yet,

[1.] He will gratify his curiosity with some predictions concerning the nations about him. It is natural to us to be pleased with prophecy, and with this he hopes to pacify the angry prince.

[2.] He will satisfy him with an assurance that, whatever this formidable people should do to his people, it should not be till the latter days; so that he, for his part, needed not to fear any mischief or molestation from them; the vision was for a great while to come, but in his days there should be peace.

[3.] He will put him into a method of doing Israel a mischief without the ceremonies of enchantment and execration. This seems to be implied in that word: I will advertise thee; for it properly signifies, I will counsel thee. What the counsel was is not set down here, because it was given privately, but we are told afterwards what it was, **ch. 31:16**. He counselled him to entice the Israelites to idolatry, **Rev. 2:14**. Since he could not have leave from God to curse them, he puts him in a way of getting help from the devil to tempt them. *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo*—If I cannot move heaven, I will solicit hell.

C.H.M.: In the first parable, we see the absolute separation of the people; in the second, their perfect justification; in the third, their moral beauty and fruitfulness; and now, in the fourth, we stand on the very summit of the hills – on the loftiest crag of the rocks, and survey the wide plains of glory in all their length and breadth, stretching away into a boundless future. We see the Lion of the tribe of Judah crouching; we hear His roar; we see Him seizing upon all His enemies, and crushing them to atoms. The Star of Jacob rises to set no more. The true David ascends the throne of His father, Israel is pre-eminent I the earth, and all his enemies are covered with shame and everlasting contempt.

It is impossible to conceive anything more magnificent than these parables, and they are all the more remarkable as coming at the very close of Israel's desert wanderings, during which they had given such ample proof of what they were – of what materials they were made, and what their capabilities and tendencies were. But God was above all, and nothing changeth His affection. Whom He loves, and as He loves, He loves to the end; and hence the league between the typical "beast and false prophet" proved abortive. Israel was blessed of God and not to be cursed of any. *"And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place; and Balak also went his way."*

Clarence Bouwman: THROUGH THE PAGAN SORCERER BALAAM, GOD ENCOURAGES ISRAEL TO BELIEVE HIS SOVEREIGNTY.

Notice . . . how there is development from the first prophecy to the second. The first

hadn't spoken of a king, but the second does. The first hadn't used the imagery of a roused lion, but the second does. Here is development; God lets Balaam see into the future, and gradually see more and more of what the future will hold for Israel, and therefore what the future will be for the world around Israel. It's a future with Israel dominating the nations. . .

Again . . . notice how the prophecy develops. The Lord let Balaam see something about a king in the second prophecy, but it's still somewhat hazy. In the third prophecy, though, the picture of what this king will do comes through clearer; he'll consume the nations, that is, he'll be victorious. Slowly the picture of God's plan for the future becomes clearer. . . , and that plan terrifies the king of Moab. **Vs 10:** "*Balak's anger was aroused against Balaam*" and he told him to get lost, "*flee to your place!*" But Balaam has another word to say, before he goes home. **Vs 14:** "*Come, I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the latter days.*" . . .

For indeed, beloved: here is enormous encouragement for Israel! For years they'd been slaves in Egypt, on the bottom of the ladder. Then they'd spent 40 years wandering through the desert, with not an acre to call their own – let alone be internationally recognized. As soon as they achieve a victory over the kings of the Ammonites –**chap 21**– Balak seeks to curse them. And in the Promised Land are Anakim and other expert fighters – what shall Israel's future bring?! Here, beloved, is the encouragement of Balaam's words: the God of the covenant shall give Israel a place on top of the ladder. Says God through Balaam: Look into the future, My people; I tell you that you shall triumph, in fact, one day a king will arise from your midst who will crush Moab, will crush so many of your enemies, you will be the head of the nations, a blessing to all! See there, beloved, what the Lord God was saying to Israel through the words of Balaam! Here was God's care for His own, His desire to encourage His people in the face of the battles ahead! Talk about the love of a covenant God for His beloved people.
<https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/11291011153710.pdf>

Dr. William J. Senn III:

Oracle #1 --

ISRAEL IS GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE AND HIS IMMUTABLE PROMISE TO BLESS THEM!

Romans 11:29, *For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.*

Oracle #2 –

ISRAEL IS GOD'S CONQUERING PEOPLE AND HIS IMMUTABLE PERSON STANDS BEHIND HIS IMMUTABLE PROMISES TO MAKE IT GOOD

Oracle #3 –

ISRAEL IS GOD'S COVENANT PEOPLE - BLESSED BY GOD!

<https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/48181313344.pdf>

TEXT: Numbers 25:1-18

TITLE: *SPIRITUAL HARLOTRY, DIVINE JUDGMENT AND PRIESTLY INTERVENTION*

BIG IDEA:

THE DESTRUCTION FROM SPIRITUAL HARLOTRY CAN ONLY BE MITIGATED BY THE ATONING ZEAL OF A FAITHFUL HIGH PRIEST

INTRODUCTION:

Here we see the height of Israel's rebellion and failure in the wilderness – just after experiencing victory and just before entering the promised land. The immorality and idolatry of spiritual harlotry compromises the covenant relationship between God and His people. God will surely bring judgment. Behind the scenes, Balaam is providing the counsel that precipitates this seductive attack by the Moabite women. He finally succeeds in his goal of enriching himself at the expense of the Israelites. Phinehas must be seen in this terrible story as a type of the faithful high priest Jesus Christ. His zeal and jealousy for the honor of God are commendable. His swift and decisive destruction of the two high profile offenders is described as an act of atonement.

Gordon Wenham: The Bible startles its readers by the way it juxtaposes the brightest of revelations and the darkest of sins. The lawgiving at Sinai was followed by the making of the golden calf (**Exod. 20–32**), the ordination of Aaron by the disobedience of his sons (**Lev. 8–10**), the covenant with David by the Bathsheba affair (**2 Sam. 7–12**), Palm Sunday by Good Friday. Here we have another classic example of this pattern, the wonderful prophecies of Balaam are succeeded by the great apostasy at Peor. In this way Scripture tries to bring home to us the full wonder of God's grace in face of man's incorrigible propensity to sin.

Raymond Brown: Behind Israel's idolatrous defection was an opponent more sinister than Balak, one who is always at work to defile and damage God's people—the devil. throughout the wilderness journey he had used every possible device to create disruption and devastation in the Israelite camp: discontent (**11:1–6**), damaged relationships within a leading family (**12:1**), jealousy (**12:2**), fear (**14:31**), rebellion (**14:4, 10**), disobedience (**14:40–45**), rivalry (**16:1–3**), disloyalty (**16:41–17:5**), quarrelling (**20:3–5**) and irreverence (**21:4–5**). At the Moabite border he had failed hopelessly with his pernicious strategy of sorcery, but now he was ready with a different device: the allurements of sexual immorality. When the devil fails at one enterprise, he quickly makes use of another.

Gordon Keddie: First sex, then false religion. . . “Those that have broken the fences of modesty,” remarks **Matthew Henry**, “will never be held by the bonds of piety.” There is a “domino effect” in personal morality and a spiritual life. One sin does lead to another. It gets easier as time goes on. And the same is true of unbelief. . .

The reason that sins follow one another with such ease, rapidity and escalating intensity is that sin is essentially a complex – a disposition, a life-style, a condition of the heart, a web of interrelated motivation.

Allen: So now we come to the ultimate rebellion of Israel in the desert. The time is the end of the forty-year period of their desert experience. The place is the staging area for the conquest of the land of Canaan. The issue is that of apostasy from the Lord by participation in the debased, sexually centered Canaanite religious rites of Baal worship-that which would become the bane of Israel's experience in the land. This chapter is an end and a beginning. It marks the end of the first generation; it also points to the beginning of a whole new series of wicked acts that will finally lead to Israel's punishment But this chapter is unique in the record of the experience of Israel in their move from Sinai to Moab-it describes their involvement in the worship of another deity [cf. **Exodus 32**].

Timothy Ashley: The chapter is placed between the Balaam oracles and the second census account for theological and literary reasons. In relation to the Balaam oracles it shows that, even while God was blessing Israel through Balaam on the heights of Peor, below on the plains of Moab Israel was showing its weak and sinful character. The parallel between this incident and that of the Torah at Sinai and the golden calf (**Exod. 20–32**) is obvious. God's blessing is because of his grace, not because of his people's merit. The juxtaposition of God's blessing his people and their sin is jarring. This chapter brings the reader back to earth after the oracular utterances of Balaam. These Israelites are, after all, the generation condemned to die in the wilderness for faithlessness (**ch. 14**). Even though God has a plan and a future for Israel, these particular Israelites are doomed. In **ch. 26**, a new census is taken because the old generation has finally died (cf. **26:63–65**). **Ch. 25** narrates the final plague that extinguished the old generation for its iniquity. Lest the reader think that this iniquity is only the old sin of the spies, this chapter spells out that Israel's sins, like God's mercies, seem new every morning. The chapter also prepares the reader to enter the new day in **ch. 26**.

I. (:1-5) GOD'S REACTION TO EXTREME CORPORATE SPIRITUAL HARLOTRY – IDOLATRY AND IMMORALITY UNDERMINE LOYALTY TO THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP AND WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED

A. (:1-2) Divine Loyalty Abused – Committing Spiritual Harlotry

1. (:1) Sexual Harlotry with Moabite Women

*“While Israel remained at Shittim,
the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.”*

Gordon Wenham: *Play the harlot* has both a physical and a spiritual sense. Sacred prostitution was a common feature of Canaanite religion; through it some of the Israelites were allured to participate in pagan sacrifices and bowed down to their gods.

Iain Duguid: In **Numbers 25**, however, we descend from the lofty heights of Balaam's prophecy to the harsh reality of the defiled people of God in the valley below. Far from being "the upright" who remain separate from the nations, the men of Israel engaged in sexual immorality with Moabite women (**v. 1**). This initial sin led naturally to the further step of joining in the Moabites' sacrifices and entering into a covenant with the god of Moab, Baal of Peor (**vv. 2, 3**). What is more, this incident involved more than a little compromise on the part of one or two individuals. It was "*the people*" as a whole who went after Moabite women; it was "*the people*" who partook of the sacrifices and worshiped their gods; all "*Israel*" joined themselves to Baal of Peor (**vv. 1–3**). In other words, this was nothing less than the Israelites' total abandonment of their status as the covenant people of God, separated to the Lord and devoted to him alone. The sexual immorality that preceded the idolatry provided a graphic picture of the underlying spiritual reality. In offering sacrifices to Baal, Israel was abandoning her true husband, the Lord, and was taking up with a foreign lover. God might never be unfaithful to his promises or change his mind about his love for his people, but Israel was certainly capable of unfaithfulness.

J. Ligon Duncan: Balaam suggests to Balak one more idea: 'If they can't be destroyed by my sorcery, if they can't be destroyed by a supernatural curse, perhaps they will destroy themselves by apostasy. Perhaps they will destroy themselves through immorality and through idolatry. So here's an idea. Take some of your Moabite women — in fact, take some of the prostitutes that are all around those temples of Baal, and have them invite some of those Israeli soldier boys to a feast. Israel has been in the wilderness a long time, and they've been eating the same thing over and over and over again. And you tell them about all the wonderful Midianite/Moabite food that it going to be at this feast, and you let them see some of those beautiful women, and you invite them to come to that great feast. And of course, when you feast it entails you bowing down to your gods. And so when this happens, when they come to your feast, bring them some of your prominent, attractive daughters, and have those daughters seduce them and invite them to worship your god. And then, by doing this you will assimilate them into your culture rather than experience them conquering you.' It's a pretty good plan. And unlike all of Balaam's other efforts, it worked.

R. K. Harrison: It is not easy to say why the Israelites submitted to the temptations instigated by Balaam (**Num. 31:8, 16**). Perhaps they were feeling flushed with victory, and even though they were conscious of their covenant obligations they perhaps felt superior to the moral laws that those commitments enshrined.

Ronald Allen: The phrase "*Moabite women*" is the connecting link that ties this chapter to the preceding ones (**22-24**). What the fathers of Moab could not do, their daughters were able to accomplish, to bring Israel to its knees — sexually, morally, in false worship, and in great judgment. The verb used to describe the action of the men is one normally used to describe the behavior of a loose woman, a harlot. Here the people, as a man, bewhore themselves with foreign, pagan women. Always in the ancient Near Eastern context, references to sexual imagery such as this suggest interconnecting

circles of sexual immorality tied to sacral rites of prostitution, essential parts of pagan religious systems of the day.

2. (:2) Participation in Idolatrous Worship of Moabite Gods

“For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.”

Elmer Smick: The subject *they* is feminine, referring to the daughters of Moab, with whom the men of Israel committed fornication.

Raymond Brown: In contemporary society, people idolize homes, jobs, possessions, sexuality, relationships, food, drink, entertainment. All these things, harmless or appropriate in their proper setting, become controlling powers that displace God in human thinking.

Roy Gane: Like modern people, the Israelites felt social pressure to conform. Idolatrous worship was a normal and integral part of the culture of other peoples, so friendship with them could easily lead to social influence and assimilation that naturally included participation in idolatry (**Ex. 34:15–16; Deut. 7:3–4**).

B. (:3) Divine Anger Manifested

1. Cause for Divine Anger

“So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor,”

Timothy Ashley: It is clear that, after sexual relationships had led to participation in the pagan sacrificial feasts, the next step was a formal association with a particular god. That god was Baal-Peor. Baal was the name of the great Canaanite god of vegetation.²¹ It was common to speak of him in various local manifestations. In combinations such as the present one, the second term is often the place-name where that local Baal was worshiped, hence this Baal was worshiped at (Beth) Peor (cf. **Deut. 3:29; 4:46**).

Dennis Cole: The idolatrous sin of the Israelites at Baal Peor is summarized by the verbal phrase *“joined in worshipping,”* which translates the single Hebrew term *wayyiṣṣāmed*, thus *“he yoked himself to.”* As to verbal usage this term is rare in biblical Hebrew, found elsewhere only in **v. 5** and **Ps 106:28**, the latter being a summary of this incident. The noun form *ṣemed* is usually translated *“yoke.”* **Milgrom** suggests some kind of covenant agreement was enacted in the process by which the Israelites were permitted (after being invited) to engage in the various forms of debauchery associated with the Baal cult. The Israelites yoked themselves together in the formal cultic ritual with the Moabites and Midianites in the worship of Baal and Beth Peor (*“house/temple of Peor”*).

2. Reaction of Divine Anger

“and the LORD was angry against Israel.”

Raymond Brown: The Israelite men had offended his holiness, ignored his word, dishonoured his name, marred his testimony and incurred his wrath.

C. (:4-5) Divine Judgment Commanded

1. (:4) Execution Orders from the Lord

a. Extreme Measures

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of the people and execute them in broad daylight before the LORD.’”

Roy Gane: To turn away divine wrath from corporate Israel and thereby save the nation from destruction, the Lord orders Moses to take all the chiefs (lit., “heads”) of the people, who are apparently the leading culprits, and expose them (i.e., their dead bodies) before the Lord in full public view (**25:4**). Undoubtedly the frightfulness of the penalty, which makes a public spectacle out of rebels under divine judgment, is also calculated to stop the apostasy dead in its tracks by deterring any other Israelites inclined to have dates with Moabite girls.

b. Extreme Danger

“so that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.”

Ronald Allen: Chapter 25 is the nadir of the Book of Numbers. It is worse even than the sins of **chapters 12-14**. Here is the great sin at the end of the road. This may be one of the most indelicate texts of Scripture, where Israel’s judges are commanded to kill their own people who are engaged in the worship of Baal (**v. 5**). We have trouble at times coming to grips with the commands of Scripture for Israel to kill here enemies. This chapter is harder for us to face; it is the command to kill some of their own people.

But these rebellious persons are like a cancer in the body. If they are not excised, they will soon ruin the whole. So the call is to kill, to execute, and to do it quickly.

2. (:5) Execution Orders from Moses

“So Moses said to the judges of Israel, ‘Each of you slay his men who have joined themselves to Baal of Peor.’”

Iain Duguid: At this point, however, things went from bad to worse. Moses did not do what the Lord commanded him. Instead of a covenantal punishment, in which the family heads were held responsible for the rebellion of those under their care, he advocated a policy of individual punishment, instructing the judges to put to death only those individuals who had actually participated in the worship of Baal Peor (**v. 5**). What is more, there is no report of even this more limited punishment being carried out: the next scene shows us Israel weeping before the Lord instead of acting to carry out his judgment (**v. 6**). The leadership of the people, including Moses, seems to have been totally paralyzed by the situation. The result of their inaction was even greater loss of life. While Moses and the leadership dragged their feet, the Lord’s judgment descended

on all of the people in the form of a plague (v. 8). No one seemed prepared to take the kind of decisive action necessary to bring it to an end.

II. (:6-9) PHINEHAS' REACTION TO SPECIFIC HIGH PROFILE INSTANCE OF BLATANT SPIRITUAL HARLOTRY – EGREGIOUS VIOLATIONS OF THE COVENANT RELATIONSHIP MUST BE DEALT WITH DECISIVELY IN ORDER TO MITIGATE THE DAMAGE

A. (:6) Reality of Blatant Spiritual Harlotry

“Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought to his relatives a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting.”

Gordon Wenham: Up to this point intercourse with foreign girls had taken place outside the camp. Now under the nose of Moses and the other people, Zimri showed his contempt for the covenant and the divine sentence pronounced against leaders like his father.

Timothy Ashley: Commentators have been divided on what this sin was: illicit sex, foreign marriage, or some cultic offense.³⁰ All three factors seem to apply. Foreigners were seen as the source of the trouble, which began with illicit sexual relations leading to cultic violations (vv. 1–3a). That this act was done out in the open (i.e., in the sight of Moses and in the sight of the whole congregation of the children of Israel) contributed to its blatant appearance. The Midianite woman could be one of those called a daughter of Moab in v. 1, since the Midianites and Moabites are connected elsewhere.

Brueggemann: For whatever reason, Moses didn't react immediately. The rabbis suggest it was because he himself had a Midianite wife.

B. (:7-8a) Response of Atoning Anger

1. (:7) Rapid Response

“When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he arose from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand;”

Robert Rayburn: We have here a contrast between two men: one, **Zimri**, an Israelite who was perfectly willing to enjoy the world's way; the other, **Phinehas**, who was committed to the Lord and his covenant. And in that contrast we see the rest of the Bible's history unfolding and the history of the church ever since. Always there are those who want to belong to the church but don't want that belonging to interfere with or compromise their place in the world. And then there are those who understand how absolute the antithesis must be between church and world, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, between the ways of the saints and the ways of the wicked.

C.H.M.: God's glory and Israel's good were the objects that ruled the conduct of the faithful Phinehas on this occasion. It was a critical moment. He felt there was a demand for the most stern action. It was not time for false tenderness. There are moments in the history of God's people in the which tenderness to man becomes unfaithfulness to God; and it is of the utmost importance to be able to discern such moments. The prompt acting of Phinehas saved the whole congregation, glorified Jehovah in the midst of His people, and completely frustrated the enemy's design. Balaam fell among the judged Midianites, but Phinehas became the possessor of an everlasting priesthood.

2. (:8a) Atoning Attack

“and he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body.”

Gordon Wenham: The description of the crime may be intended to suggest that Phinehas slew them in the very act of intercourse.

J. Ligon Duncan: But there's a grandson of Aaron who is at this meeting. He's the son of Aaron's son Eleazar. This is one of Aaron's grandsons, and he watches this, and he is absolutely enraged. And that's the fourth scene that we see. You see it in **verses 7-9**. It is a stunning, priestly, zealous response. He takes it upon himself to mete out immediate judgment and justice on the wickedness that he has seen in Israel. There's no trial; there's no warning; there's no court; there's no jury; there's no permission; there's no arrest warrant. There is just immediate death. Phinehas kills this Israelite chieftain's son and this Midianite chieftain's daughter in the very act of their consummating a multiple immorality. They're not only involved in sexual immorality, they're involved in spiritual immorality. It's not just fornication that's going on here: it's idolatry; it's apostasy. It's turning the back on the God of Israel, the God who saves. And Phinehas kills them both right on the spot.

C. (:8b) Result of Executing the Offenders

1. Termination of Divine Judgment

“So the plague on the sons of Israel was checked.”

2. Tally of the Dead

“And those who died by the plague were 24,000.”

Roy Gane: The body count of 24,000, an average of 2,000 from each of the twelve tribes, is the highest ever suffered by the Israelites during their long and painful passage from Egypt to Canaan. It is even higher than at Kadesh, where 14,700 died in addition to Korah & Co. before Aaron's propitiatory (*kipper*) intercession with incense brought the onslaught of divine plague to a halt (**Num. 16:46–49**). The only divine punishment on Israel during biblical times that slew more was the plague that took the lives of 70,000 as a result of David's census (**2 Sam. 24:15**).

III. (:10-13) PHINEHAS' REWARD FOR HIS ZEAL AND FAITHFULNESS – THOSE WHO ARE JEALOUS FOR GOD'S HONOR EARN A PERPETUAL REWARD FOR THEIR ZEAL AND FAITHFULNESS

A. (:10-11) Righteous Jealousy

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 11 ‘Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the sons of Israel, in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them, so that I did not destroy the sons of Israel in My jealousy.’”

Raymond Brown: God was to be exalted and adored within their community; not ignored, disgraced and despised as he was both by the offensive practices at Baal-Peor and by the adulterous behaviour of the couple back in the Israelite camp. Phinehas personified the priestly ideal: ‘he revered me and stood in awe of my name’. The honour of God’s name is a crucial priority for the contemporary believer, living as we do in a society that has scant regard for spiritual values and moral purity.

B. (:12-13) Reward of Covenant of Peace

1. Nature of the Reward

“Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give him My covenant of peace;”

Iain Duguid: In the rest of this chapter we see the consequences for those involved. Phinehas received the Lord’s blessing because of his action. His zeal for the Lord’s honor was rewarded with a “*covenant of peace*” (v. 12), a lasting commitment by the Lord that his sons would share in his priestly ministry and that the high priesthood would descend through his line. The Midianites, meanwhile, were condemned to be the enemies of Israel from then on for their part in the affair. This is because the Israelites’ apostasy was the result of the pursuit of a deliberate policy of seduction on the part of the Moabites and Midianites in accordance with Balaam’s counsel (31:16). Those who lead God’s people into sin face serious consequences for being the agents of temptation.

2. Duration of the Reward

“and it shall be for him and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood,”

Roy Gane: God’s covenant of eternal priesthood for Phinehas is similar to the later divine covenant of dynastic monarchy for David (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89). Both covenants promise loyal individuals that they and their descendants will fill existing institutional positions of national leadership within the framework of the covenant established with Israel at Sinai. According to the New Testament, Christ occupies both positions within the “*new covenant*”: He is eternal High Priest (but after the order of Melchizedek; Heb. 7) and the Davidic King (e.g., Mark 11:10; Luke 1:32–33; Rev. 19:11–16; 22:16).

Thomas Constable: The priests were to represent God to the people. This is exactly what Phinehas did on this occasion. He executed God’s wrath against sin and punished the sinners. In so doing he atoned for the sin by representing Israel before God, and he restored the covenant. God rewarded him by promising that his descendants would

enjoy peace and would occupy the office of the high priest forever (cf. **Psalm 106:30-31**). This they did (cf. Judges 20:28) with the exception of a short interruption in Eli's days. The Romans finally broke up the Israelite priesthood.

This everlasting covenant of peace guaranteed a privileged position of service to God to Phinehas and his descendants. It will find final fulfillment when the descendants of Phinehas, through Zadok's branch of Phinehas' family, serve God in the millennial system of worship by offering memorial sacrifices in the temple.

3. Reason for the Reward

a. Jealous for God's Honor

"because he was jealous for his God,"

b. Mediatorial for God's People

"and made atonement for the sons of Israel."

Dennis Cole: The righteous act of Phinehas in executing the two defiant Baal worshipers also brought about atonement (*kipper*) for the children of Israel. Again this act of grace by vigilant defense of the faith resulted in the survival of the majority of the Israelites, and the nation was restored on account of God's grace. **Milgrom** remarks, "Phinehas provided a ransom for Israel, and God's wrath was assuaged. So too, when the Levitical guard cuts down the encroacher on God's sancta, he also provides a ransom that stays God's wrath from venting itself upon Israel."⁶⁸¹ By virtue of Phinehas's priestly role in being a mediator between God and man, the covenant of peace extended well beyond him and his priestly descendants; it included the entire nation that survived the plague. Now in the third generation of the lineage of Aaron, the first high priest, the priesthood is reconfirmed as everlasting (**1 Chr 6:4-15**). Phinehas demonstrated through his defense of the sanctum that he was a worthy mediator between God and man in the Israelite cult.

IV. (:14-15) SHAMEFUL LEGACY FOR THE TWO HIGH PROFILE OFFENDERS – HIGH PROFILE SPIRITUAL TRAITORS EARN A PERPETUAL LEGACY OF SHAME

A. (:14) Slain Israelite Man = Zimri

"Now the name of the slain man of Israel who was slain with the Midianite woman, was Zimri the son of Salu, a leader of a father's household among the Simeonites."

Wiersbe: Zimri was a prince in Israel and Cozbi was the daughter of a prince, so perhaps they thought their social status gave them the privilege of sinning.

J. Ligon Duncan: The names of these two brazen sinners are recorded for all time.

B. (:15) Slain Midianite Woman = Cozbi

“And the name of the Midianite woman who was slain was Cozbi the daughter of Zur, who was head of the people of a father's household in Midian.”

Ronald Allen: Zimri (“*My Remembrance*”) had been named in praise of God. However, he has come to be forever remembered as the one who nearly destroyed his people in his flagrant, wanton attack on the pure worship of God. With his name turned on its head, he serves as a memorial to destruction. The name of his Midianite partner is given as Cozbi daughter of Zur (v. 15). Her name is an example of names deliberately changed by Israel because of their contempt for her. “Cozbi” means “*My Lie*” or “*Deception*.” She stands forever memorialized as a prime example of the deception of the allure of pagan worship. **Verse 18** speaks of her as one who was also from a noble house of her own people. Likely she was a priestess of her religion, a prototype of Jezebel who would later be instrumental in bringing Baal and Asherah worship into the center of the life of Israel.

V. (:16-18) CALL FOR RETALIATION AGAINST THE MIDIANITES – THE ENEMIES OF GOD’S PEOPLE MUST SUFFER RETRIBUTION

A. (:16-17) Command to Retaliate

*“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,
17 ‘Be hostile to the Midianites and strike them;’”*

Cf. **31:1-24**

R. K. Harrison: Reprisals against the Midianites were called for, and accordingly God instructed Moses to commence harassing attacks against Midian. The time was not yet opportune for a full-scale war, since Israel’s military strength had been weakened by the most recent plague. But the nation had experienced a foretaste of the idolatry that she could expect to encounter in Canaan. From the disastrous outcome of the Moabite temptation the people also learned that the covenant ideal would demand of them rejection of such invitations to apostasy and evil in the future.

B. (:18) Charge of Hostility and Deception

“for they have been hostile to you with their tricks, with which they have deceived you in the affair of Peor, and in the affair of Cozbi, the daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister who was slain on the day of the plague because of Peor.”

Dennis Cole: The Baal Peor incident would provide a reminder to the Israelites throughout their history of the dangers of intermarriage with the women of the nations whose strong religious influence could lead men astray to worship other gods. This incident served as a case study in understanding the inviolability of God’s holiness and righteousness. The prophet Micah would use the sequence of the Exodus and Baal Peor to challenge the Israelites with the need to remember God’s faithfulness in redemption so that they might not succumb to the world’s influences and that they “*may know the righteousness of the Lord.*” By this they would understand the will of God for their

lives, to be a distinctive people for whom Yahweh meant the greatest good and by whom the world would see the fullness of God's grace and mercy. Micah then summarized the essential issues of man's response to God in this special relationship, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (**Mic 6:5–8**).

Thomas Constable: This incident, as the others in which Israel departed from God, shows the inveterate sinfulness of humans even when God blesses us greatly. It also demonstrates the holiness of God, the seriousness of sin in that it destroys fellowship with God, and the necessity of atonement by blood to restore sinners to fellowship with God.

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Where have we seen in the church the **corporate impact of sin**?
- 2) How does this passage reinforce the need for **church discipline** where appropriate?
- 3) What can we learn about Christ's work of **atonement** from the actions of Phineas here?
- 4) How seductive are the sins of **sexual immorality** and **idolatry**?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Dennis Cole: Note the broad chiastic outline of the narrative below.

- A Setting of Immorality: Worship of Baal of Peor (**25:1–3**)
 - B Moses' Instruction from Yahweh: Take, Execute, and So Allay Wrath (**25:4**)
 - C Moses Instructs the Leaders of Israel: Kill the Offenders (**25:5**)
 - C' Phinehas Follows Moses' Instruction: Kills Zimri and Cozbi (**25:6–8a**)
 - B' Wrath of Yahweh Allayed: Plague Halted (**25:8b**)
- A' Results of Israel's Immorality: 24,000 Died in Plague (**25:9**)
 - With the execution of Zimri, described as a leader (nāšî') of the Sim

Gordon Wenham: The basic reason for mentioning the sin of Peor at this point is that the narrative of Numbers is arranged more or less chronologically. However, many more things happened on the way from Egypt to Canaan than are actually recorded, and it is always right to ask why a particular incident is included. I noted that there are certain parallels between the journey from Egypt to Sinai and the journey from Kadesh to the plains of Moab. There are also clear parallels between the events at Sinai and

those in the plains of Moab. In both the revelation of God is followed by a flouting of basic covenant principles; there is a census, and laws about sacrifice and the festivals are given. Not only do the incidents of the golden calf and Baal-peor (**Exod. 32; Num. 25**) correspond in the overall arrangement of the books, there are several internal correspondences. Both episodes involve the worship of other gods (**Exod. 32:8; Num. 25:2**). Both times God's wrath is appeased by the immediate slaughter of those involved (**Exod. 32:26–28; Num. 25:7–8**). As a result the tribe of Levi is set apart for divine service in the first case, while in the second Phinehas is promised an eternal priesthood (**Exod. 32:29; Num. 25:11–13**). There is another interesting point of comparison between the stories. At Sinai the people did not know what was going on between God and Moses (**Exod. 32:1**). Similarly in the plains of Moab, the Israelites cannot have known what Balaam was predicting for them. In both cases they must have learnt subsequently what happened. These repetitions are more than just a literary device, they enshrine theological truth. God's character does not change with changing circumstances. The older generation who had witnessed the exodus and Sinai had died out. The new generation who were to conquer Canaan had to learn the same lessons over again.

Raymond Brown: The ruinous incident at Shittim testified to the wilderness community about the nature of God's holiness (he cannot tolerate sin), mercy (his appointed priest made atonement for the Israelites so that he did not put an end to them, **13, 11**) and justice. Zimri, Cozbi and their immoral accomplices did not escape the divine judgment. Neither did the depraved Moabite and Midianite hordes who, by enticing the Lord's people, 'followed Balaam's advice and were the means of turning the Israelites away from the LORD' (**31:16**). They too came under the judgment of a just and righteous God (**16–18; 31:1–24**). Anticipating a different life in a new environment, the severely chastised Israelites were taught that trifling with sin has lethal consequences.

Roy Gane: While the Moabite and Midianite women appeared friendly, the catastrophic outcome for Israel leads us to suspect that their peoples intentionally sought to drive a wedge between the Israelites and their God, putting in his hand a "sword" to slay them. Whodunit? Who thought up the brilliant and devastatingly effective strategy of using sex and food as lethal weapons to kill Israelites by luring them to commit capital offenses punishable by their own deity?

When the Israelites later attacked the Midianites to avenge the deaths of those whom the Lord slew, we get a clue when "*they also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword*" (**31:8**; see also **Josh. 13:22**). What was he doing with the Midianites? Hadn't he gone home (**Num. 24:25**)? If we "connect the dots," Balaam came up with a scheme and returned to counsel the Midianites and Moabites to use their women to incite Israelites to rebellion against the Lord (**31:16**). If so, by shrewdly exploiting his understanding of the relationship between the Lord and his people, he succeeded in having them cursed after all, probably in order to gain the "honorarium" that God had denied him (cf. **24:11**; also **2 Peter 2:15**).

As the destroyer of the Lord's people, Balaam would have topped the Lord's "Most Wanted" list. From a prophet privileged with special communication from God, Balaam became a deadly "Osama bin Ladin," turning Israelites into the target of their own deity, just as an Al-Qaeda gang turned Americans and their buildings into targets of American jetliners. Tragic as September 11 was, the Baal of Peor disaster resulted in eight times as many deaths.

Roy Gane: Why was it important for the Israelites to worship correctly? To begin with, the Lord was the superior party to his covenant with Israel. Therefore he had the right to establish the rules of interaction. Anything that deviated from these rules violated his covenant authority.

Worshiping God improperly results in a distorted view of him. Since no human being living on earth has seen his face (**Deut. 4:15–18**), a material representation of him can only be inaccurate and diminish his transcendent glory. Therefore the Lord refuses to identify with an idol of himself (cf. **Ex. 20:4–5**). So even ostensible worship of him by means of an image is really polytheistic, having another god in violation of the first command of the Decalogue (**20:3**).

There is another problem with idolatry: It denies his real immanence. The Israelites do not need any images of their deity, even in the authorized sanctuary, because he draws near to them (**Deut. 4:7**). So an idol rejects the sufficiency of the Shekinah Presence, as if the Lord does not really dwell among his people. Remember that it is precisely when the Israelites lost faith in the Lord's presence in the cloud on Mount Sinai (**Ex. 24:15–18**) that they made and worshiped a bovine image to give them false assurance (**32:1–6**).

Other ancient Near Eastern religions were believed to have resident deities, but Israelite worship was unique in the way it walked a theological tightrope to simultaneously affirm the nearness and transcendence of God, without compromising either. At the heart of Israelite religion, the sanctuary and its services enacted the central concept that the awesome Creator desires an intimate relationship with faulty human beings. Divine immanence was epitomized when Christ became flesh and tabernacled among us (**John 1:14**). Therefore, a person who denies Christ's incarnation is "antichrist" (**2 John 7**; cf. **1 John 2:22**). The equivalent of an "antichrist" in Old Testament times was an idolatrous Israelite, who implicitly denied the divine Presence by worshiping a false substitute.

If people gain diminished, distorted, and unbalanced conceptions of God through improper worship, they can readily slide into worship of other gods (**Deut. 4:15–19, 23–24**). **Judges 8** illustrates three easy steps into apostasy. First, Gideon made a golden ephod (priestly garment) as an instrument for unauthorized worship of the Lord (**Judg. 8:27a**). Then the unauthorized instrument itself became an object of worship: "*All Israel prostituted themselves [Qal of znh] by worshiping it there*" (**8:27b**). Finally, "*no sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves [Qal of znh] to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god*" (**8:33**). Once they were into idolatry,

switching deities was not such a big deal.

Dennis Cole: This is the first occurrence of Baal in the Hebrew Bible, and he would become the primary antagonist to Yahweh for the hearts of the people of Israel from this setting to the end of the two Israelite kingdoms. The historical setting is the latter half of the Late Bronze Age, when the deity Baal was emerging as one of the major operative deities in the land of Canaan. He is best known from the texts of Ugarit as the agent of the creative order, who with his consort Anath defeated the forces of evil, namely the deities Yammu (Sea), Mot (Death), and Lotan (Leviathan, Sea Monster), thereby bringing order to the chaos. Baal was a lesser known deity in Mesopotamia during the Early Bronze Age and in the beginning of the Middle Bronze (patriarchal) period. **Milgrom** simply states that “the patriarchs did not know him.”⁶⁵⁸ The first appearance of Baal as a prominent deity in the land of Canaan is evidenced in the Hyksos period texts from Egypt in the latter half of the Middle Bronze Age. The Egyptians bemoaned the fact that the “foreign rulers” from the land of the Hurru and Retenu were not worshipers of Amon-Re but of a god called Baal Hazor, which they associated with their god Seth.⁶⁵⁹ With the emergence of the classical Canaanites in the land of the southern Levant, apparently an amalgam of northwest Semitic peoples and some non-Semitic elements such as the Hurrians and Hittites, came the emergence of Baal as a primary operative deity in the cults of the land.

Wiersbe: “*The way of Balaam*” (2 Peter 2:15-16) is Balaam’s lifestyle as a soothsayer and false prophet. His motive was to make money and he used his opportunities, not to serve God and His people, but to satisfy his craving for wealth. In other words, he was a hireling who sold himself to the highest bidder. . .

“*The error of Balaam*” (Jude 11) was not only thinking that he could disobey God and get away with it, but also in thinking that those he enticed to sin would get away with it. The false teachers in the days of Peter and Jude preyed upon ignorant people and tried to lead them into sin (vv. 10, 13, 18; Jude 4, 8, 18-19), all the time covering everything over with a cloak of “religion.” . . .

Of course, “reward” was the motivation behind what they did (v. 11), and this could mean a number of things: money, power over people, popularity, and personal sensual pleasure.

“*The doctrine of Balaam*” (Rev. 2:14) is the lie that it’s permissible for saved people to live like unsaved people, that God’s grace gives us the right to disobey God’s Law. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel’s compromise with idolatry is called “adultery” and “playing the harlot,” for the nation was “married” to Jehovah at Sinai. (See Jer. 2:19-20; 3:1-11; Ezek. 16:23; and Hosea 1-2.)

David Thompson: Now when we come to **Numbers 25**, we come to a sordid story that apparently was instituted and instigated by Balaam (**Numbers 31:16**). He invited the Israelites to get to know and participate with the godless neighbors that included the Moabites and the Midianites. What we see here is this:

WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE GET INVOLVED IN IDOLATRY OR IMMORALITY, THEY WILL EXPERIENCE THE PUNISHMENT AND CHASTISEMENT OF GOD.

Balaam was not able to curse Israel, but the sad reality is, he was able to seduce Israel. God protected Israel from a direct military attack of the Moabites and Midianites, but there was a way they could infiltrate the Israelites and that was the way of immorality and idolatry. God’s people got involved in pagan things and it cost them.

Apparently Balaam suggested to the Moabites and Midianites that they should have a religious festival to honor Baal and invite the Jews to attend (**Numbers 31:16**). This will be the first time the Israelites got involved in Baal worship, but it won’t be the last time.

In fact, this is the first time Baal occurs in the Hebrew Bible, but it won’t be the last. Baal was the chief deity of the Canaanite gods. They believed this was the deity responsible for rain and fertility. Their worship services included both male and female prostitutes and was a free-for-all party that encouraged all kinds of sexual immorality.

Both idolatry and immorality were clearly forbidden in the law of God (**Ex. 20:1-5, 14**). But Baal worship couldn’t care less about the Word of God. Balaam decided to invite the Jews to come to one of their religious parties and several decided it would be the neighborly thing to do and they went. There are three main parts to this:

PART #1 – God is angered by His people who participated in idolatrous and immoral behavior. **25:1-3**

When things are going well, God’s people must keep up their guard against being seduced away from God’s Word and will into that which is contrary to His Word and will.

PART #2 – God punishes those who were involved in the idolatrous and immoral behavior. **25:4-9**

PART #3 – God rewards one who stands against idolatry and immorality. **25:10-18**

TEXT: Numbers 27:15-23

TITLE: COMMISSIONING OF JOSHUA TO SUCCEED MOSES

BIG IDEA:

LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS MUST BE BASED IN DIVINE SELECTION, MUST FUNCTION ACCORDING TO THE POWER AND AUTHORITY OF THE SPIRIT, AND MUST ISSUE IN PASTORAL GUIDANCE AND CARE

INTRODUCTION:

In **verses 12-14** Moses had just been reminded by the Lord of his exclusion from the upcoming entrance of the Israelites into the promised land. His sin was directly tied to God's judgment of his departure from this earth – a reality reinforced by the recent death of his brother Aaron. Yet Moses does not respond in bitterness or self-interest. His focus is on the need for a qualified replacement shepherd to meet the military and pastoral needs of God's flock moving forward. This passage presents key principles for any leadership transition in Christian organizations.

Timothy Ashley: In effect, the theme of Moses' death becomes a way of prolonging the climax of the story from **Num. 20:12** (where it is first announced) until **Deut. 34:4-8**, where it is narrated. Here in **Num. 27:12-23** the tension is heightened by reintroducing the fact that Moses must die before Israel goes into the land. When will he die? That question draws the reader forward through the rest of the book of Numbers and beyond into Deuteronomy, where it is mentioned at least twice (in **1:37-38** and **3:25-28**) as a basis for further exhortation (**2:1ff.**; **4:1ff.**). The climax is finally reached just before the Jordan is crossed. **Num. 27:12-23** reintroduces this theme as a way of moving the narrative forward to the character of Joshua while keeping the story tied to its roots in Moses. . .

In the rite performed by Moses in the presence of Eleazar, both the old generation (Moses) and the new generation (Eleazar) cooperate in the transfer of the leadership to Joshua, the man in the middle, who belongs to the old (Exodus) generation but was exempted from the death sentence passed on that generation and, like the new generation, is going into the land of promise. Thus Joshua provides both continuity with the past and development of a new kind of leadership for the future. It is clear, however, that, even though the leadership has been passed ritually to Joshua, Moses continues to exercise the leadership as long as he is alive. Moses and Joshua may be partners in leadership from now until the end of **Deuteronomy 28** but Moses is clearly the senior partner; Joshua himself will not come into the leadership until "*Moses my servant is dead*" (**Josh. 1:2**).

David Thompson: Now what is fascinating is that when Moses is informed that he is going to die, he doesn't request that he not die. He does not ask God for more years. What he does is to ask God that He would rise up a leader who would watch out for the welfare of the people.

I. (:15-17) NEED FOR A QUALIFIED SHEPHERD TO REPLACE MOSES AND LEAD GOD'S FLOCK

"Then Moses spoke to the LORD, saying,"

Amazing humble prayer lifted up by Moses; not resentful of the judgment against him which precludes him entering the promised land; instead, concerned for the pastoral care of the flock of God

A. (:16) Qualified from an Overall Standpoint -- God's People Need Divinely Appointed Human Leadership

"May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation,"

Ronald Allen: He does not select his own heir. This is not a hereditary post nor one that was his to dispose – only the Lord can provide a successor to Moses. Since the Lord knows all men, he will be the judge of the inner qualities demanded for the task.

The successor to Moses was not chosen because of a blood relationship to Moses; he was not a king. Nor was he chosen by a popular election; for Moses had not been elected by the people – something they had constantly reminded him! (cf. **14:4**, where the people want to select a leader instead of Moses). The successor was to be appointed directly by God. The Lord is King; Moses is only an agent. The successor was not to be a figurehead or a symbol but a leader who goes before his people, leading them in the direction they should go. He is pictured as a shepherd, one needed by the flock. Moses' concern was that his flock not be left without a shepherd.

Ronald Van Overloop: Moses addresses God as "*the God of the spirits of all flesh*" (also in **16:22**).

- 1) This identifies God as the Maker of each and every man in his whole being (personality, gifts, and talents).
- 2) God is the best judge of each man's ability and aptitude and He penetrates the inmost recesses of every heart.
- 3) Also God fashions each man and re-fashions, supplying them with the sufficient faculties to bear their burden.

<http://www.graceprc.org/sermon.cfm?ID=321>

B. (:17a) Qualified from a Military Standpoint -- God's Leader Must Lead and God's People Must Follow

"who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in,"

Robert Rayburn: It is the heartfelt concern for the people of God – not for a cause or an idea or a program, but for the people of God themselves, their spiritual life and the blessing of God among them and through them – that is the mark here of Moses' greatness and continues to be the mark of the greatness of all the church's finest men.

They were men who were concerned for their own souls and so were concerned for the souls of others. Augustine had the penitential psalms written on the wall above his bed so that he could pray them over and over as he lay dying. But in his last days he was preeminently concerned with the spiritual welfare of his flock. . .

But Moses' response to the news of his impending death and the way this reminds us of Christ himself challenges us to imagine a life in which one is always thinking about the problems, the troubles, the needs of others and almost never thinking about one's own ups and downs, one's own happiness or sadness. It is very hard for us to imagine such a life. But that was Christ's life all his life. He was thinking all the time of others (us included!), working all the time on our behalf, carrying all the time our burdens in his heart. Extraordinary! We make the Lord's life too simple by failing to ponder what sort of life it must have been, what an utterly unique life it had to be for its selflessness, its self-forgetfulness, its constant concentration on the welfare of others.

Raymond Brown: The leader's responsibility to go out and come in before them may refer primarily to his successor's role in conquest, the commander taking his soldiers out to battle. Strong and resilient, he would be at their head in expeditions, knowing the best way to mobilize his troops effectively as he led them out, and concerned not only about military strategy but about his soldiers' well-being. Valuing their lives, and the welfare of their families, he would need to act responsibly so that at the end of hazardous encounters he could safely bring them in, back to base. Such leadership demands resources of courageous strength, exactly what the Lord required of Joshua as the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan. The Lord knew that such an exacting military assignment was beyond Moses' strength. He had been a fine wilderness leader; a man with different gifts was necessary if Israel was to conquer Canaan.

C. (:17b) Qualified from a Pastoral Standpoint -- God's Flock Needs Godly Shepherding

“that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd.”

Gordon Wenham: *Sheep which have no shepherd* (cf. **1 Kgs 22:17; Ezek. 34:5; Matt. 9:36**). Kings and other leaders are often likened to shepherds in the prophets and in other oriental texts (e.g. **Isa. 40:11; 44:28; Ezek. 34**).

Roy Gane: Being a good shepherd or herdsman can demand toughness and courage, involving exposure to all kinds of discomforts, irritations, and perils (**Gen. 31:40; 1 Sam. 17:34–35**). Being a good shepherd of human beings is no less challenging. It requires toughness and humility, courage and ability to lead rather than drive. Moses' years with woolly flocks were peaceful compared to the four decades he spent shepherding Israelites through the desert toward the Promised Land. Had he not possessed a character of granite and at the same time a gentle humility surpassing that of all others (**Num. 12:3**), history would have been a lot different.

Dangers:

- False shepherds who lead the flock astray
- Weak shepherds who fail to protect and lead the flock decisively
- Authoritative shepherds after the pattern of Diotrephes who lord it over the flock

II. (:18-23) PROVISION OF JOSHUA TO SUCCEED MOSES WITH FULL AUTHORITY

A. (:18-21) Divine Appointment of Joshua

1. (:18a) Identifying Joshua to Succeed Moses

a. Family Identification of Joshua

“So the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take Joshua the son of Nun,’”

b. Spiritual Identification of Joshua

“a man in whom is the Spirit,”

2. (:18b-19) Commissioning Joshua – Specific Instructions for Moses

a. (:18b) Personal Commissioning by Moses

“and lay your hand on him;”

Gordon Wenham: Through the imposition of hands either blessings or sins were transferred, and the one on whom hands were laid became the substitute or representative of the other man.

b. (:19a) Public Presentation of Joshua

“and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation;”

c. (:19b) Formal Commissioning

“and commission him in their sight.”

3. (:20) Empowering Joshua

“And you shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him.”

Raymond Brown: The retiring leader had to be willing to hand over some of those responsibilities that he had carried for the past forty years. Old leaders have sometimes been less than enthusiastic about handing over the Lord’s work to younger successors. Moses was a man of fine spiritual stature to hand over the reins so lovingly.

4. (:21) Supporting Joshua

“Moreover, he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the LORD. At his command they shall go out and at his command they shall come in, both he and the sons of Israel with him, even all the congregation.”

- a. Support from Partnership with the Priest
- b. Support from Guidance from the Lord

Raymond Brown: Eleazar was not allowed to be a despotic or dictatorial colleague. He was to seek God’s mind by enquiring of the Urim. Joshua was to stand before Eleazar, and Eleazar was to stand before the LORD. Neither was free to pursue his own will. The Urim and Thummim were probably two flat stones, coloured differently on each side and kept in a pocket in the high priest’s breastplate. They were used by the high priest to cast lots in order to determine what God’s mind might be on issues requiring a decision. It is the Holy Spirit’s work to encourage, strengthen and preserve our mutual cooperation and to lead us into a clear awareness of God’s will.

B. (:22-23) Human Commissioning of Joshua by Moses

“And Moses did just as the LORD commanded him;”

1. (:22b) Public Presentation of Joshau

“and he took Joshua and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation.”

2. (:23) Personal Commissioning by Moses

“Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, just as the LORD had spoken through Moses.”

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) How is the pattern of NT church leadership with its plurality of elder structure different from the model of leadership reflected under Moses and Joshua?
- 2) Why is it wrong for a church leader to consider himself indispensable to God’s work?
- 3) As you have witnessed leadership transitions in various Christian contexts (either within the church or para-church organizations) what are some of the positive and negative lessons you have gleaned?
- 4) How should spiritual leaders seek the Lord’s guidance today for their flock?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Wiersbe: It was certainly no surprise that Joshua was the man God chose to take Moses’ place, for Joshua had worked closely with Moses since the nation left Egypt. He led the

Jewish army in defeating the Amalekites (**Ex. 17:8-16**), and he ministered as Moses' servant (**24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28**), even going up Sinai with Moses when God gave the law (**v. 13; 32:17**). As one of the twelve spies, he joined with Caleb in encouraging the People to enter the land (**Num. 14:6-9**). He was filled with the Spirit (**27:18; Deut. 34:9**) and had been disciplined in the rigors of Egyptian slavery and the wilderness march. In every way, he was a perfect successor to Moses. . .

During his years of service with Moses, Joshua learned some valuable principles of spiritual life and service, principles that still apply today. When you read the Book of Joshua, you see that he was concerned for the glory of God and the welfare of the people, and that he was careful to obey the orders God gave him. The two times Joshua didn't seek God's will, he brought the nation into shameful defeat (**Josh. 7 and 9**), but to his credit, he trusted God to make his mistakes work out successfully in the end.

J. Ligon Duncan: Succession Plan

In verses 12-14, I want you to see **God's judgment on Moses** — and it's just. God explains there why He is meting out this sentence on Moses. There's a very, very good reason. It's both a reason of justice and it's a reason of sanctification and pastoral care of the people of God that Moses is receiving this sentence.

Secondly, I want you to see the **amazing prayer** that Moses lifts up in response. This would not have been the prayer that I would have been praying, were I Moses and had I just gotten this sentence. Moses' response is far more godly than I would have dreamt to have prayed. His pastoral heart shows through, because this prayer has nothing to do with him. There is not one word of "But, Lord! I've done so much for You! I've done so much for them!" It's all about the people of God. It shows you his heart. You see that in **verses 15-17**.

And third, I want you to see how the Lord **graciously answers Moses' prayer**. You see it beautifully set forth in **verses 18-21**. . .

But isn't it fascinating, even in **verse 21**, how the distinction between Moses and Joshua is made clear? Moses spoke with the Lord face to face. The Lord gave Moses a word, and Moses turned around and gave that word to the people. But with Joshua, how will Joshua discern the Lord's will? He'll go to Eleazar the priest; Eleazar will consult the Urim and the Thummin; the Lord will reveal through the Urim and the Thummin what the children of Israel are to do; Eleazar will report that back to Joshua; and Joshua will report it to the people of God. Not so with Moses: "He is the servant in all My house, and I speak with him face to face."

You see, when you take the step from Moses to Joshua, it's a step down. The whole prophetic office in Israel began unlike anything else in life. It began in its high form, and it was all downhill from there. From Moses to Isaiah is down; from Moses to Jeremiah is down; from Moses to Malachi is down; from Moses to Samuel is down. No one, not any of the prophets of the old covenant, could match Moses — not even Joshua, who would take the children of Israel into the land. The whole narrative stresses

here this unique, matchless, close communion that Moses had with the Lord. And that's interesting, isn't it? I mean, the whole narrative is give and take — Moses spoke to the Lord, so the Lord said to Moses, Moses did as the Lord commanded. It's back and forth. The Lord speaks to Moses, Moses speaks to the Lord, the Lord speaks to Moses, and Moses does what the Lord says. You see a picture of this communion. . .

And then, finally, Moses again shows **his humility** in his faithful obedience to the command of the Lord in **verses 22-23**. Let's look at these four things together tonight as we continue to ponder that question: Why is the mediator not going in to inherit the land, but the people are, and even the daughters of Zelophehad?

Travis Berg: You are Replaceable

And **Numbers 27** shows it. Here, we see the changing of the guard. Moses steps down and passes the heavy mantle of leadership to Joshua. In today's reading, we see the temporal and the spiritual kingdoms united in one man. Joshua is prophet and king. The Word of the Lord comes to him. Also king. He leads the armies of Israel into the land of Canaan. He smote 31 kings of Canaan and put their people to the sword. He settled the tribes in Israel in their allotted territory. But this great work is in the future. Today, Moses' helper becomes Moses' successor.

We need to hear this text because we often suffer from hubris, the sin of pride. We ask ourselves, How can I ever leave my parish? How can they ever get along without me? Sometimes, there's no choice in the matter. We all have our Mount Abarim. For every pastor, for every magistrate, for every calling which God has ordained, there will be the end of the line. Moses needs a successor because he is a sinner. Sinners die.

Replaceable doesn't mean nonessential. Replaceable doesn't mean that everyone is uniform. Moses was better than Joshua. *"But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."* (**Deut. 34:10**) There are pastors you look up to more than others. There are magistrates who are better rulers than others.

But remember Paul's words: *"And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?"* (**1 Cor. 4:7**) Moses was the greatest prophet, except for Jesus, who ever lived. How did he spend his ministry? The successes were few and far between. Forty years of dealing with an unbelieving people. Forty years of slander and murmuring. Forty years of pulling out the weed of idolatry and seeing two more weeds take its place. And finally, when the next generation is trained, pious and ready, Moses is told by God to move on. Moses had to live by faith too. He didn't see the conquest. He didn't see God fulfill all of His promises. In the same way, when we take God's call to another congregation or when we step down due to infirmity or death, we too trust that God will fulfill His promises, that He will send another shepherd to lead His people.

<https://lcmiside.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/berg-sermon-matins-20160520.pdf>

TEXT: Numbers 31:1-54

TITLE: *THE LORD'S FULL VENGEANCE ON MIDIAN*

BIG IDEA:

THE SEVERITY OF GOD'S VENGEANCE EXPOSES THE FALLACY OF ATTACKING THOSE WHO ARE UNDER HIS PROVIDENTIAL PROTECTION AND PROMISED BLESSING

INTRODUCTION:

Balaam thought he had figured out a way around God's prohibition of cursing the Israelites so that he could cash in on his desired payday. The people of Moab and Midian gained a foothold in the Israelite community through the age-old temptations of immorality and idolatry. But their strategy was short-sighted and doomed to failure. God would not allow His honor and His name to be abused. He responded by using Israel under the leadership of Moses and Joshua to execute His full vengeance on Midian. Despite the failures of the elect nation, God remained faithful to His covenant commitment of providential protection and promised blessing. This conquest of Midian and division of the spoils of war became the model for how Israel would trust the Lord for conquering the promised land. Each section of the text highlights specific attributes of God that would prove essential to victory for the Israelites.

Gordon Wenham: Nevertheless it is right to say that the narrator is more concerned with the aftermath of the battle than with the battle itself. The decimation of the Midianites fulfilled the divine command issued in **25:16–18** and reiterated in **31:1ff**. But it also looks forward to the conquest of the Canaanites, who were to be treated similarly (cf. **21:2–4; 32**), and the distribution of the spoils on this occasion between warriors, people, priests and Levites serves as a model for the big campaign. The percentage of booty allocated to the priests and Levites anticipates the allocation of special cities to them in **chapter 35**.

Roy Gane: For me, a believer in the divine authority of the Bible, Israel's holy wars were unique because that nation was a true **theocracy** acting on the basis of direct revelation from God and carrying out retributive justice on his behalf. When God tells you to do something, you do it, even if it is unusual and unpleasant. . .

The Lord's goal was to provide a spiritually and physically secure home for his people within a limited geographic area so that they could flourish in their own land without being destroyed by idolatrous, corrupt, and predatory neighbors.

Raymond Brown: This encounter with the Midianites was the last military engagement in Moses' life. It must have been a rich inspiration to those Israelite soldiers to know that the old leader was there in the camp, confident that, because God had sent them, they would return as victors. Moses knew that, although it was his last battle, it was certainly not theirs. Moses' final conflict confirmed God's sovereignty over the nations

and his supremacy over the meaningless idols of paganism, the religious nonentities of Israel's new neighbours.

Timothy Ashley: Outlining four aspects of holy war methodology, which follow the brief section on the battle against the Midianites (vv. 1–12):

- (1) inflicting the ban or hērem, vv. 13–18,
- (2) cleansing the soldiers, vv. 19–24,
- (3) dividing the booty, vv. 25–47, and
- (4) bringing an offering to Yahweh, vv. 48–54.

I. (:1-12) CONDUCTING THE BATTLE – GOD'S POWER AND SOVEREIGNTY

‘Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,’

A. (:2) Mandating the Final Mission for Moses

“Take full vengeance for the sons of Israel on the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered to your people.”

Dennis Cole: God vindicates the righteous and punishes the sinner as an essential part of his ethical, moral, and just character. God is not out for retaliatory revenge but for vindication of the honor of his people and himself and ultimately for restoration of the well-being of humanity.

Robert Rayburn: The Midianites were a confederation of tribes, associated with if not overlapping with the Moabites, Amalekites, and other smaller tribal groupings. They roamed the Sinai and the Transjordan. So the total destruction of this particular group of Midianites did not mean that the Midianites themselves ceased to exist. Israel is found having to deal with Midianites in the book of Judges (**chapters 6-8**). These are the Midianites who were associated with the Moabites and had been involved in the fiasco related in **chapter 25** when some Israelite men consorted with Midianite women and participated in their worship of Baal.

B. (:3-6) Mobilizing the Troops to Attack Midian

1. (:3) Explaining the Need for Troops to Attack Midian

“And Moses spoke to the people, saying, ‘Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian, to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian.’”

2. (:4-5) Enlisting the Troops for War

*“A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war.
So there were furnished from the thousands of Israel,
a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.”*

Raymond Brown: When those 12,000 men left for the Midianite encampment, their confidence was not in the size of their army but in the power of God. The slender troops returned victorious, boasting not in their numerical strength, physical prowess or military tactics but in the abundant generosity of a God who, fulfilling his promise, had met their weakness with his incomparable strength.

Ronald Allen: On hearing the commandment of the Lord, Moses turns to the people and calls for a strike force, an elite corps of soldiers who will carry out the punitive war. This is a limited, contained, special task calling for a limited army of special forces.

3. (:6) Engaging the Troops with Holy Support

a. Deploying the Warriors

“And Moses sent them, a thousand from each tribe, to the war,”

b. Deploying Phinehas

“and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war with them,”

Roy Gane: Phinehas and the unspecified holy objects that he takes with him represent the Lord’s presence with the troops. When he blows the *teru ‘ah* signal on a silver trumpet (cf. **10:9**), they will know that the divine King in their midst (cf. **23:21**) will give them victory. Another reason to send Phinehas, specifically, is the fact that this unsqueamish priest has energetically begun the process of vengeance by slaying Cozbi (**25:8, 15**). So his presence will inspire the Israelite soldiers to finish the job.

David Thompson: The duty of the priest before a battle was to build morale by encouraging the men to have courage and trust God (**Deut. 20:2-4**). It was Phinehas who specifically upheld the righteousness of God and put a stop to the plague by executing the culprits responsible for idolatry (**Numbers 25:6-13**). So he went with Israel back to confront the Midianites.

c. Deploying the Holy Vessels and the Trumpets

“and the holy vessels and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand.”

Ronald Allen: The blowing of the sacred clarion was an act of celebrative worship. While the concept is alien to us today, even the warfare that Israel was to engage in was regarded as a sacral act – in some way an act of the worship of God (see **Ps 149:6**, the praise of God linked to the wielding of a sword). “Onward Hebrew Soldiers” was more than a metaphor for Israel; it was a descriptive reality of army life.

C. (:7-8) Making War Victoriously Against Midian

1. (:7) Killing all the Males – the Warriors

“So they made war against Midian, just as the LORD had commanded Moses, and they killed every male.”

2. (:8a) Killing the Five Kings of Midian – the Leaders

“And they killed the kings of Midian along with the rest of their slain: Evi and Rekem and Zur and Hur and Reba, the five kings of Midian;”

Warren Wiersbe: Many enemy leaders were killed during the battle, and after the battle Joshua killed five remaining Midianite kings, including Zur, the father of Cozbi the woman with whom Zimri had sinned in the camp of Israel (**25:14-15**).

3. (:8b) Killing Balaam – the Instigator

“they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.”

D. (:9-12) Mopping Up Activities of Capturing, Burning, Plundering and Possessing

1. (:9) Capturing

“And the sons of Israel captured the women of Midian and their little ones; and all their cattle and all their flocks and all their goods, they plundered.”

2. (:10) Burning

“Then they burned all their cities where they lived and all their camps with fire.”

3. (:11) Plundering

“And they took all the spoil and all the prey, both of man and of beast.”

4. (:12) Possessing

“And they brought the captives and the prey and the spoil to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest and to the congregation of the sons of Israel, to the camp at the plains of Moab, which are by the Jordan opposite Jericho.”

II. (:13-18) INFLICTING THE BAN – GOD’S JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

A. (:13) Battle Assessment

“And Moses and Eleazar the priest and all the leaders of the congregation went out to meet them outside the camp.”

B. (:14) Blaming Anger

“And Moses was angry with the officers of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, who had come from service in the war.”

C. (:15-16) Botched Assignment

1. (:15) Key Failure

“And Moses said to them, ‘Have you spared all the women?’”

2. (:16) Key Justification for Their Eradication

“Behold, these caused the sons of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, so the plague was among the congregation of the LORD.”

D. (:17-18) Brutal Adjustment

1. (:17) Kill All Young Males and Sexually Active Women

“Now therefore, kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man intimately.”

David Thompson: There is another **Day of Vengeance** coming against the entire Gentile world. God will avenge Israel and He will destroy men, women and children who were Israel’s enemies.

2. (:18) Spare Only Female Virgins

“But all the girls who have not known man intimately, spare for yourselves.”

Brueggemann: This slaughter was not the result of “collateral damage” in the heat of battle, or even an outrage committed in the heat of war’s bloodlust. It was purposeful judicial slaughter after the battle was already over. In fact, this action fits the modern definition of ethnic cleansing or possibly even genocide. The conquest was a holy war aimed at driving out an entire human population from Canaan (**33:50–53**), annihilating everyone there to purge idolatry and remove its temptations (**Deut 20:16–18**). It was a divine act against a people who had filled up their cup of wrath (cf. **Gen 15:16**), as at the flood and in Sodom (**Gen 6:19**). And it should be noted that the Lord threatened the same against Israel if she mimicked their sins (**Lev 18:24–30; 20:22; Deut 18:12**).

Allen (1990:967) notes that this ties in with eschatological judgment, which will exceed the scope of anything like the losses that Midian suffered that day.

III. (:19-24) PURIFYING THE PEOPLE AND THE POSSESSIONS – GOD’S HOLINESS

A. (:19-20) Purifying Instructions Given by Moses

1. (:19) Purifying the People

“And you, camp outside the camp seven days; whoever has killed any person, and whoever has touched any slain, purify yourselves, you and your captives, on the third day and on the seventh day.”

2. (:20) Purifying the Possessions

“And you shall purify for yourselves every garment and every article of leather and all the work of goats’ hair, and all articles of wood.”

B. (:21-24) Purifying Instructions Given by Eleazar the Priest

“Then Eleazar the priest said to the men of war who had gone to battle, ‘This is the statute of the law which the LORD has commanded Moses:’”

1. (:22-23) Purifying the Possessions by Fire and Water

a. (:22-23a) Purifying by Fire

“only the gold and the silver, the bronze, the iron, the tin and the lead, 23 everything that can stand the fire, you shall pass through the fire, and it shall be clean, but it shall be purified with water for impurity.”

b. (:23b) Purifying by Water

“But whatever cannot stand the fire you shall pass through the water.”

Ronald Allen: Purification extends to things as well as to people. Things that are ritually impure will contaminate people who are otherwise clean. Hence it is another mark of the grace of God to provide a means for the purification of goods as well.

2. (:24) Purifying the People

“And you shall wash your clothes on the seventh day and be clean, and afterward you may enter the camp.”

Gordon Wenham: Though the Midianite war was a holy war carried out in obedience to the divine command and sanctified by the presence of the priest, those involved became unclean through killing or contact with the dead. They were, therefore, excluded from the camp until they were purified (cf. **5:1–4; 12:14–15**). Purification involved sprinkling with the water of impurity (**19:11–22**) on the third and seventh day after contact. The booty too had to be purified. Metal objects had to be passed through fire and then sprinkled with the water of purification. Other items simply had to be washed (**23–24**).

Warren Wiersbe: Whether in peace or in war, it was important to Israel that they maintain a holy relationship with the Lord. They had to make a difference between the clean and the unclean, and no compromise was permitted. This week-long period of purification would remind the 12,000 soldiers and the people in the camp that the nations they would face in Canaan were dangerous, not only because they were enemies but they were also unclean sinners who could tempt them and defile them. Moses wanted to prevent another defeat like Baal Peor.

**IV. (:25-47) DIVIDING UP THE SPOIL –
GOD’S BLESSING OF ABUNDANCE AND PROVIDENTIAL CARE**

A. (:25-31)

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,”

1. (:26) Count the Total Spoil

“You and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers’ households of the congregation, take a count of the booty that was captured, both of man and of animal;”

2. (:27) Divide Between the Warriors and the Non-Warriors

“and divide the booty between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation.”

Robert Rayburn: Here we have a beautiful and powerful illustration of this principle of **community** or **corporateness** in the Christian life. A relatively few Israelite soldiers are sent into action and achieve a great victory. But the victory is won on behalf of the entire people. So much is this the case that the spoils of the victory are distributed almost equally between those who won them on the battlefield and those who did nothing except perhaps to pray for a successful outcome. The individual soldier and the community are in this way inextricably related to one another: the one fights for the other, the one benefits from the work of the other. But even those in the community who receive the spoils of war won for them by the soldiers must then pass on to the officers of the church a share of what they have received. Always there is the church: always its worship, always its corporate life and the individual and the individual family must always attend to the life and work of the church and the sanctuary. Surely there were some who grumbled. “I risked my life; why should I give half the spoils to those who did not?” But in the answer to that question is found an important part of our philosophy of life.

3. (:28-29) Tax the Warriors and Give to Eleazar

a. (:28) Amount of the Tax

“And levy a tax for the LORD from the men of war who went out to battle, one in five hundred of the persons and of the cattle and of the donkeys and of the sheep;”

b. (:29) Recipient of the Tax

“take it from their half and give it to Eleazar the priest, as an offering to the LORD.”

Timothy Ashley: The purpose of the levy was to provide for the priests and the Levites. The care of priest and Levite is a theme found elsewhere in Numbers (e.g., **5:9–10; 6:19–20; 18:8–32**). The levy was one out of 500 (0.2%) of both humans and animals from the half of the soldiers for the support of the priests, and one out of 50 (2%) from the half of the congregation for the support of the Levites. This 1:10 ratio is about the same as for the tithe (cf. 18:26). Since the soldiers took the lion’s share of the risks in war, their share was larger than that divided among the rest of the population, and the amount given to support the priests was less.

4. (:30) Tax the Non-Warriors and Give to the Levites

a. Amount of the Tax

“And from the sons of Israel's half, you shall take one drawn out of every fifty of the persons, of the cattle, of the donkeys and of the sheep, from all the animals;”

b. Recipients of the Tax

“and give them to the Levites who keep charge of the tabernacle of the LORD.”

5. (:31) Compliance with the Instructions

“And Moses and Eleazar the priest did just as the LORD had commanded Moses.”

Dennis Cole: This verse functions as a transitional colophon between the giving of the instructions (vv. 25–30) and the carrying out of each step of the process (vv. 31–40), with repetition of the clause at the end of the distribution for the priests (v. 41) and at the conclusion of the accounting and distribution of that which was apportioned for the Levites from the people. Moses, Eleazar, and the patriarchal leaders of the Israelite tribes faithfully followed the instructions from the Lord regarding the counting and distribution of the spoils of war. Again this principle of faithful obedience to the instructions from the Lord was a key to the success and well-being of the Israelite community.

B. (:32-35) Tally of the Total Spoil

1. (:32) Sheep

“Now the booty that remained from the spoil which the men of war had plundered was 675,000 sheep,”

2. (:33) Cattle

“and 72,000 cattle,”

3. (:34) Donkeys

“and 61,000 donkeys,”

4. (:35) Virgin Women

“and of human beings, of the women who had not known man intimately, all the persons were 32,000.”

C. (:36-41) Tally of Half the Spoil for the Warriors

1. (:36-37) Sheep

a. (:36) Warriors’ Portion

“And the half, the portion of those who went out to war, was as follows: the number of sheep was 337,500,”

b. (:37) Lord’s Portion

“and the LORD’s levy of the sheep was 675,”

2. (:38) Cattle

a. Warriors’ Portion

“and the cattle were 36,000,”

- b. Lord's Portion
"from which the LORD's levy was 72."

3. (:39) Donkeys

- a. Warriors' Portion
"And the donkeys were 30,500,"
- b. Lord's Portion
"from which the LORD's levy was 61."

4. (:40) Virgin Women

- a. Warriors' Portion
"And the human beings were 16,000,"
- b. Lord's Portion
"from whom the LORD's levy was 32 persons."

Gordon Wenham: The thirty-two girls assigned to the priests either became their slaves or were employed in the sanctuary (**Exod. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22**).

5. (:41) Lord's Portion Given to Eleazar the Priest

"And Moses gave the levy which was the LORD's offering to Eleazar the priest, just as the LORD had commanded Moses."

D. (:42-47) Tally of Half the Spoil for the Non-Warriors

1. (:42-43) Sheep

"As for the sons of Israel's half, which Moses separated from the men who had gone to war — now the congregation's half was 337,500 sheep,"

2. (:44) Cattle

"and 36,000 cattle,"

3. (:45) Donkeys

"and 30,500 donkeys,"

4. (:46) Virgin Women

"and the human beings were 16,000"

5. (:47) Lord's Portion Given to Levites

"and from the sons of Israel's half, Moses took one drawn out of every fifty, both of man and of animals, and gave them to the Levites, who kept charge of the tabernacle of the LORD, just as the LORD had commanded Moses."

V. (:48-54) OFFERING GOLD TO YAHWEH – GOD’S GRACE AND FORGIVENESS – EXPRESSION OF THANKSGIVING

A. (:48-50) Giving the Offering

1. (:48) Initiation of the Offering by the Military Leaders

“Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, approached Moses;”

2. (:49) Motivation for the Offering = Providential Protection During Battle

“and they said to Moses, ‘Your servants have taken a census of men of war who are in our charge, and no man of us is missing.’”

3. (:50) Presentation of the Offering

a. Based on Personal Plunder

“So we have brought as an offering to the LORD what each man found,”

b. Consisting of Gold Jewelry

“articles of gold, armlets and bracelets, signet rings, earrings and necklaces,”

c. Designed to Make Atonement

“to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD.”

Raymond Brown: When these items had been counted, the soldiers realized that they had not lost a single man in battle; and as an expression of gratitude and to make atonement for themselves (**50**) they offered sacrifices to the Lord.

Ronald Allen: For a chapter that begins with such a grim story, there is a perfectly lovely ending. This is the account of a spontaneous extra gift of the officer corps to the Lord. Beyond the tax that they were required to give of the animals and persons that had been distributed to them in the sharing of the booty of the war, there were innumerable objects that the soldiers had taken for their own use as they looted the camps (v. **53**). Now the captains of thousands and of hundreds approached Moses (v. **48**) and made a magnanimous offering of numerous beautiful objects of gold – armlets, bracelets, signet rings, earrings, and other ornaments (v. **50**). This gift, they assured Moses, was in gratitude for a most remarkable fact: not one soldier of the elite Hebrew corps had died in the war (v. **49**)! The only explanation for this is the presence of the Lord among his people in his holy sanctuary.

B. (:51-52) Receiving the Offering

1. (:51) Recipients = Moses and Eleazar

“And Moses and Eleazar the priest took the gold from them, all kinds of wrought articles.”

2. (:52) Total Amount = 16,750 Shekels of Gold

“And all the gold of the offering which they offered up to the LORD,

*from the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds,
was 16,750 shekels.”*

C. (:53) Seizing the Offering

“The men of war had taken booty, every man for himself.”

D. (:54) Commemorating the Offering

“So Moses and Eleazar the priest took the gold from the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and brought it to the tent of meeting as a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD.”

Roy Gane: Moses and Eleazar bring the commander’s contribution into the sacred tent as a memorial/reminder for the Israelites before the Lord (**31:54**), testifying to the fact that their lives have been ransomed (cf. the terminology in **Ex. 30:16**). The rich endowment shows the fine attitude of Israel’s military leaders, who care about the men under their command, are unselfish, respectfully acknowledge the human authority over them, and are grateful to the Lord. This is a breath of fresh air for Moses, who can end his career on an upbeat. His ransomed people are becoming like that memorial: gold purified through fire (cf. **Num. 31:22–23; Rev. 3:18**).

Gordon Keddie: Israel’s gold memorial was a monument of God’s goodness to them. It pointed to the Lord. It reminded them of his power to give them victory over their enemies. It encouraged them for their approaching clash with the Canaanites. It preached that God is able to keep his people, and called them all to trust in him as they sought to serve him day by day. The true memorials of the modern Christian are similarly simple, spiritual and God-centered. They are the sacrifices of praise, the worship of full hearts, the grateful remembrances of signal blessings in our past and the present testimonies of the Holy Spirit to our spirit that we are children of God.

Some curious aspects of the story that have scholars debating its veracity:

- 1) the killing of all the male Midianites – while we see that later Midian becomes a threat again to Israel (**Judges 6-8**)
- 2) the waging of this battle with no casualties for the Israelites
- 3) the large numbers of animals seized

But the Lord intended this historical event to be remarkable.

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) Does the Lord ever use the church in this age to execute His vengeance on those who oppose His kingdom agenda?
- 2) What does the severity of God’s justice teach about end time vengeance?

3) Why do the non-warriors get to share in the booty along with the warriors who fought and captured the goods?

4) When do we offer up a special gift to the Lord in response to His specific providential blessings?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Raymond Brown: God's Justice Expressed

Deliberate transgression invites tragic consequences. The extermination of these Midianites was an act of divine judgment upon an idolatrous and immoral people who had done their utmost to corrupt Israel's faith. King Balak had been unsuccessful in destroying God's people by employing a renowned sorcerer, so, on Balaam's advice (16), he had infiltrated Israel's ranks with idolatrous and immoral women who would introduce them to Baalism's pornographic rituals and sexual practices.

Phinehas became the messenger of God's judgment (25:6-15), and although at the time all the other offending Midianites had escaped punishment, such disastrous evil could not be overlooked. Israel's soldiers were the instruments of God's wrath towards the many as Phinehas had been to the offensive couple. Those troops were among the first to fulfil the promise made to Abraham: *'your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not reached its full measure'*.¹² These Canaanite and Transjordanian Baal-worshippers had practised this debased fertility religion for decades, and many thousands of people had been corrupted by their obscene practices. Sexual prostitution became part of their religious scene, and it is likely that those Moabite women who enticed the Israelites to their camp were professionally engaged in such licentious activity. Here, as God judged these Midianites by means of this surprise Israelite attack, it was the beginning of a more extensive condemnation of these debased Canaanite practices. The unchecked sins of the Amorites and their Baal-worshipping partners had now reached its full measure.

God is not partial in his judgment. He does not have high standards for one set of offenders while turning a blind eye to others. The Israelite men who had openly engaged in these pernicious acts suffered the death penalty (25:8-9), and now those Moabites and Midianites who had introduced them to such immoral rituals would also experience God's wrath. Under Israelite law, adultery was punishable by death. The Israelites involved in the Baal-Peor defection were guilty not only of marital infidelity but of spiritual adultery as well. They had forsaken their uniquely faithful divine Husband and gone after other lovers.

God is just, righteous and holy, and cannot tolerate sin. There are no exceptions. Even the devoted old leader had to suffer a measure of punishment because of his unbelief, disobedience and rebellion at Meribah, and was to die on the wrong side of Jordan (20:12; 27:12-14). . .

The extermination of the offenders, and of the children who would perpetuate such debased religious practices, was an act of judgment on them but a demonstration of mercy to Israel. It guarded the Lord's people against serious pitfalls in coming days. Drastic measures were necessary to forestall potential disaster. In the next chapter we shall read that, after the conquest of Canaan, two and a half tribes were to return, by agreement, to that Transjordan area. Unless removed, these same Midianite men and women would have been able to renew their attempt to destroy Israel by immorality. Their pornographic shrines would have been within easy reach of the newly settled Israelites, presenting the young generation with fresh temptations. East of the Jordan, the Midianite danger would have been a recurrent peril unless something radical was done about it before crossing into Canaan.

The Lord knew that, once these Israelite travellers settled in their new land, Baalism would become a religious and moral hazard. So, before he left them, Moses gave them the Lord's command; on arriving in Canaan they were to destroy all the '*carved images*' of the Baal worshippers, and to '*demolish all their high places*'. If, instead of driving them out, they had fraternized with the people of the new land, they would have debased their faith, compromised their integrity, dishonoured their God and degraded themselves. God has no favourites. If the Israelites failed in this matter, then, God said, '*I will do to you what I plan to do to them*' (33:50–56) Their holy God was not vindictive towards Israel's enemies; he was jealous for Israel's purity. If they jeopardized that, they too would be judged.

Iain Duguid: It is interesting to note how they described this offering: it was "*to make atonement for ourselves before the Lord*" (v. 50). In other words, they recognized that their lives were not their own but belonged to the Lord. As they fought against and exterminated a people who had transgressed against the Lord, perhaps they recognized that they too were natural-born rebels against God, by nature children of his wrath. The Midianites had sinned and had died as a result of their rebellion against the Lord, just as the first generation of the Israelites had sinned and died in the wilderness. That much was fitting and right. Yet as the new generation purified themselves externally from the uncleanness of battle, they were confronted with the reality of their own internal need for cleansing. If God had dealt with Israel as they deserved, they themselves could easily have been completely wiped out, just as the Midianites were. In his grace the Lord had not dealt with them according to their just deserts. On the contrary, not one of their soldiers was missing: the Lord's wrath upon sin had been poured out on his enemies, and they, by his grace, were all still standing.

That, I think, was what touched their hearts to give so generously to the Lord. The Israelite soldiers recognized that as unclean sinners, their own lives were forfeit before a holy God, yet they had been spared. In appreciation of God's goodness and mercy, therefore, they responded with a freewill offering to "*make atonement*" for their lives. They reacted to the Lord's grace with generous offerings.

This surely is where the passage intersects directly with our own experience. **Numbers 31** shows us clearly the wrath of God against sin, a wrath that leads to a sure judgment that we dare not take lightly. God judges sinners and those who lead others into sin, and we are all guilty before him on both of those counts. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and we have all encouraged others to commit a variety of transgressions. . .

As objects of God's wrath, then, our lives are naturally forfeit in the presence of a holy God. What we need is an offering that will make atonement for our souls and enable us to remain alive in the midst of that final holy war on sin. In God's mercy and grace he has provided the ultimate atonement offering for our sin in the person of Jesus Christ. It is not silver or gold that makes atonement for our lives, but the precious blood of the Lamb of God, slain in our place. The holy war of God against our sin has not by any means been abandoned: the charges are real, and someone must answer for them. However, Jesus has been our substitute, bearing in his body on the cross the full penalty of that warfare. There at the cross the Lord executed total warfare against sin in the person of Jesus, so that we might be spared the consequences of our unbelief, disobedience, and sin. Through his death, our lives are spared. . .

If you understand the cleansing that you have received, the atonement that God has provided for you in Christ, then you too will delight to respond with an offering of your own. It is a fresh appreciation of God's grace that moves our hearts to worship. It is not coincidental that the writer to the Hebrews follows up his reminder that "*Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood*" (**Hebrews 13:12**) with the exhortation, "*Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*" (**v. 15**). Do you sometimes find your heart cold toward God when you come to worship? I know that I often do. I need a fresh glimpse of the reality of the gospel to warm my icy heart and to stir me to joyful praise. How can we not delight to confess his name, though, when our eyes are filled afresh with his sacrifice for us?

Gordon Keddie: Sin finds out Midian – too late for change

It is important to note in these days of squeamishness about God's judgments, that there is a moment in the rebelliousness of every individual and of whole communities and nations, beyond which the striving of God's Spirit will not go (**Genesis 6:3**). God is longsuffering and plenteous in mercy, but he will not be resisted and reviled by sinners for ever. One day the openly unbelieving become the irretrievably lost. God takes them at their word. They do not want the Lord's will, or the Lord's salvation. They say so in thought, word and deed. They resist the gospel, they despise the Saviour, they oppose, obstruct and oppress the Lord's people. And God, who is jealous of his name, his Son, his Word and his people's welfare, decrees an end of them, temporally and eternally. Vengeance is his and, one day, he does repay (**Romans 12:19**). On this occasion, God chose Israel to be the instruments of his wrath upon certain, named, reprobate peoples. This task was uniquely revealed to Moses and Israel at that time and was bound up with the conquest of the land of promise.

Peter Wallace: Vengeance Is Mine: the Violence of the Kingdom

The **names** of the kings are interesting – especially in light of the temptations in the wilderness:

Evi – means “trouble, sorrow, wickedness”

Rekem – means “variegated” – and hence, impure

Zur – means “adversary, or foe”

Hur – probably means “parched”

Reba – means “to lie down” (particularly in the sexual sense of the word)

At the very least, these names are suggestive of Israel’s temptations in the wilderness. When Israel kills the five kings of Midian, they are putting temptation to death.

This begins to point us down the path of our spiritual warfare. Because our enemies are not the five kings of Midian. And we fight our warfare not against flesh and blood – but against principalities and powers. When we say that our warfare is spiritual, that does not mean that our warfare is purely internal. Paul says that we wage war against cosmic powers. It’s not that earthly foes are too powerful – it’s that earthly foes are too insignificant! . . .

We need to realize that God’s vengeance on Midian was just. Midian deserved death – and it was only God’s mercy in Jesus Christ that resulted in the “international adoption” of the little girls of Midian into the family of Jesus. . .

Do you remember what Israel did with the gold at Sinai? They turned it into a golden calf – and they committed sexual immorality and idolatry. Now, after their sin at Peor – where they committed sexual immorality and idolatry – they take all the gold, and they offer it to the LORD.

This is over 400 pounds of gold. (Just as a comparison – all the gold in the tabernacle was a little over 2,000 pounds – so this is 1/5 of the amount of gold used in the tabernacle!)

Now, 40 years later, Israel recognizes that left to themselves, they will return to idolatry. Left to themselves, they will return to sexual immorality. They need to humble themselves before the LORD. And so not only do they give the portion to the priests and Levites as commanded, but they also take the gold – the very thing that they misused last time – and they give it to the LORD.

TEXT: Numbers 32:1-42

TITLE: *COMPROMISE REGARDING THE LAND PROMISE – GOOD OR BAD?*

BIG IDEA:

COMPROMISE WITH GOD’S REVEALED AGENDA LEADS TO A QUAGMIRE OF COMPLEXITY

INTRODUCTION:

Obedience is the simplest course of action. When we start to compromise and introduce our own wisdom as if we have devised a better plan than God, it opens the door to complexity and ethical challenges. The given in this passage must be the foundational understanding that God had clearly revealed the boundaries for the promised land. The request to settle down in the Trans-Jordan pasturelands represents the introduction of man’s wisdom in conflict with those instructions. However, this scenario is not presented as a clear case of rebellion. The two tribes make their case and Moses (after the plan is fine-tuned to include their responsibility in the conquering campaign) accepts the plan and Israel moves forward. (There can be debate about whether Moses inquired fully as to the will of God in this decision.) Some commentators argue that the outcome is totally positive since Israel has now expanded her territory and has a buffer zone against future invasions. But that would require us to conclude that man’s wisdom can improve on the plans of God.

I look at this case study as parallel to NT church government issues. I believe that God’s revealed agenda is plurality of elder government without a designated senior pastor who functions in an elevated leadership role. However, Christendom has chosen to reject the simple biblical model and has offered some compelling arguments (based largely on expediency) in favor of the senior pastor model which now predominates. God still chooses to bless that altered model; but you cannot therefore conclude that man has improved upon the revealed plan of God. There is complexity when it comes to motivation and when it comes to the interaction of a wide number of divine objectives.

So this chapter is an interesting and complex study. It follows shortly after the story of Balaam — another occasion where the will of God had been expressly communicated, but God allowed the prophet to pursue his alternative path and meet with Balak. Everything cannot be painted as black and white. There seems to be more involved than a simple substituting of instant gratification for faith in the promise of God. The reasonable arguments made by the two tribes, the endorsing role of Moses, and the resulting blessing of God must all be evaluated along with the initial proposal that seems misguided.

Peter Wallace: [very helpful analysis] God said that Israel was to inherit the Promised Land. Reuben and Gad want an inheritance outside the Promised Land. That’s at least somewhat distressing. In **Numbers 34**, God will describe the borders of the Promised

Land – and he draws a line from the Sea of Galilee, down the Jordan River, to the Dead Sea. Reuben and Gad want to stay on the east side of the Jordan River. Moses wants them to come with Israel into the Promised Land. They reach a compromise.

How should we think of this? **Is compromise always wrong?** Sometimes a compromise can be reached on the basis of a principled moderation. Other times a compromise can repudiate principle entirely. Of course, some principles matter more than others! . . .

the whole narrative fits into a basic chiasm – with the **acceptance of the compromise** at the heart of the text.

<https://media-cloud.sermonaudio.com/text/52314215570.pdf>

Ronald Allen: All this affords Moses the opportunity to preach a brief homily on the history of the national experience in the desert. In this preaching Moses presents an example of a biblical use of history for the instruction of the people of God. He speaks with specificity, with passion, with historical insights, and with a contemporary feel – the tying of the experience of the past into the present of his hearers. In some ways this section may be thought of as a model of biblical exhortation. . .

The underlying theology is based on the notion that the land is the gift of God. How would it be possible for the Israelites to spurn his gift? Even though their fathers had done this despicable act, is it really possible that such a act of cowardice and ingratitude might be done again? In asking these questions, Moses is developing the central message of this book. The new generation has a new opportunity to be other than their parents. They may be the people who succeed. They do not have to repeat the failure of their parents.

Gordon Wenham: To appreciate the significance of this episode it should be noted that Transjordan lay outside Canaan, the land promised to the fathers. Its boundaries are defined in **chapter 34**, where it is clear that from the sea of Galilee southwards the Jordan marks the eastern frontier of Canaan. That any Israelite tribe should consider settling outside the land promised to Abraham showed a disturbing indifference to the divine word, the word on which Israel's existence entirely depended. The nation stood poised to cross the Jordan and take up its inheritance, when suddenly three of the tribes announced their intention of opting out. It looked like the spy story (**chapters 13–14**) all over again. That time the whole nation except Caleb and Joshua had cold feet, refusing to trust in God's promises. This time the tribes of Gad, Reuben and part of Manasseh declared they were uninterested in settling in the promised land. This led to a heated exchange with Moses in which their attitude is explicitly compared to that of the earlier generation (**6–15**), and throughout the story implicit allusions are found to the events some forty years earlier at Kadesh. Gad and Reuben then proposed that their fighting men should accompany the other tribes across the Jordan and return home only when the conquest of Canaan was complete. This proposal satisfied Moses and he therefore allocated them the land they had requested (**16–38**).

Robert Rayburn: Calvin, on the other hand, regards this narrative as a story of God's providence bringing good out of human sin. By the repentance of the two and a half tribes and their willing contribution to the conquest, the boundaries of the Promised Land were enlarged. The plan may have been sinful and unbelieving in its origin, but it was sanctified by faithful obedience and became a means to a good thing. Moses, in fact, accepts their plan as soon as they promise to help the rest of the nation conquer Canaan. There is flexibility to God's plan. He had defined the Promised Land long centuries ago, but was willing to enlarge it here so long as his people did that in the right way.

I. (:1-5) COMPROMISING REQUEST TO POSSESS THE LAND EAST OF THE JORDAN (ALREADY CONQUERED) BECAUSE OF ITS SUITABILITY FOR LIVESTOCK – DESIRE FOR INSTANT GRATIFICATION OR JUSTIFIABLE IMPROVED PLAN?

A. (:1a) The Situation = We need grazing land for livestock

“Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had an exceedingly large number of livestock.”

Robert Rayburn: It is an interesting detail of the text that though Reuben is mentioned first here in v. 1, in the rest of the chapter Gad is mentioned first. Apparently Reuben is mentioned first at the beginning because of that tribe's seniority, Reuben having been Jacob's first son, but elsewhere Gad's leadership in the plan to remain on the east side of the Jordan is reflected in the order in which the tribes are mentioned.

Raymond Brown: The Reubenites may have been 'claiming their rights' as the direct successors of Jacob's eldest son. The firstborn in Israel had distinct privileges and, although these had been forfeited because of Reuben's sin, they may have hoped that family privilege would give them the right to choose the best for themselves. For many people, self-interest is the primary determinative feature in life's choices. **Oswald Chambers** used to define sin as 'my right to myself'. Christians have other priorities; their thinking is determined and controlled by God's right to themselves. Selfishness is a recurrent danger in a postmodern society. Millions of our neighbours are urged to pursue courses of action that actively foster self-gratification as a primary goal in life. Nothing could be more contrary to the biblical presentation of the Christian ideal. Christ had no desire to please himself, and he is every believer's perfect model. Their dominant ambition is to glorify God and to serve others. Anything that actively encourages us to magnify self is suspect.

B. (:1b) The Opportunity = This land meets that need

“So when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that it was indeed a place suitable for livestock,”

walking by sight rather than by faith; opportunity does not always translate to conformity to the will of God

Gordon Keddie: The defeat of the transjordanic kings, Sihon of the Amorites and Og of Bashan, left Israel in sole occupation of land that was “suitable for livestock” (32:1;

21:21-35). This lay outside the borders of Canaan and was not part of the promised land. . . It was a clear case of self-interest triumphing over known duty.

Iain Duguid: The key word in the first verse is the verb, “*They saw.*” Seeing in the Bible is definitely not believing. On the contrary, sight is often the exact opposite of faith. Seeing is frequently the prelude to bad decisions because our eyes tend to make superficial judgments. Eve “*saw*” that the fruit of the tree of knowledge was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and so she ate the forbidden fruit instead of believing God’s Word that this fruit was not good (**Genesis 3:6**). The result was disaster for humanity. Later, when Lot “*saw*” that the plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the Garden of the Lord or like the land of Egypt, he chose to separate from Abraham and settle in the unpromised land to the east of the Jordan (**Genesis 13:10**). Before long he found himself living in Sodom and in danger of sharing in the judgment that was coming on that place (see **Genesis 19**). **Choosing with our eyes** often leads us into spiritually dangerous places—places that may then be hard to leave because our **possessions** weigh us down and hold us there. Wherever our possessions are, there our heart is also.

This was exactly what happened with the Reubenites and Gadites. Their wealth of cattle combined with the grazing potential of the Transjordanian plain prompted them to ask if they might receive the area of the Transjordan that they were then occupying as their inheritance, rather than crossing the Jordan with the remainder of the people into the Promised Land proper (**32:5**). To be sure, they made their request sound spiritual by arguing that the Lord was the one who had subdued this territory before his people (**v. 4**), but it was ultimately economics that was driving their request, not theology. In effect they were asking to settle down somewhere other than where God had called them to live because it was more suitable for their lifestyle.

The temptation to choose with our eyes rather than by faith is one that we also face. We are tempted to choose spouses based on looks rather than Christian character, or careers based on their income potential rather than the opportunity to use our gifts to serve our community. We are tempted to spend vast amounts of money on clothing, cars, and the accessories of an affluent lifestyle instead of investing our treasure in heavenly causes. Our affluence constantly poses a temptation to us to settle down here and invest ourselves in this world instead of setting our hearts on the things that are above.

C. (:2-5) The Petition = Please give us this land and grant us an exemption from crossing over the Jordan

1. (:2) Addressing the Leaders

“the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben came and spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the congregation, saying,”

2. (:3-4) Arguing Their Case

“Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon, 4 the land which the LORD conquered before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock; and your servants have livestock.”

3. (:5) Appealing for a Favorable Decision

a. (:5a) Give Us this Land Here

“And they said, ‘If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession;’”

b. (:5b) Exempt us from the Military Campaign Across the Jordan

“do not take us across the Jordan.”

They should have been more careful at this point in their request to explain that they were not abandoning their responsibility to the community at large.

II. (:6-15) UNCOMPROMISING DENIAL BASED ON EMOTION AND REASON – IMMEDIATE GUT SENSE THAT THIS REQUEST WAS OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF GOD’S PLAN

“But Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben,”

A. (:6-7) Denial Based on Two Fundamental Objections – Visceral Response

1. (:6b) Compromises the Solidarity of the Mission

“Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here?”

Why should you be exempt from the struggle and the risk?

We should all be in this together as brothers – sharing the struggle and the risk.

Gordon Keddie: First of all, this was a **betrayal** of their own people. . . They thought only of their prosperity in Gilead and their avoidance of the cost of taking Canaan. They wanted to quit while they were ahead – an understandable impulse to be sure – but a cheap and wholly unjustified abandonment of those to whom they were bound in fellowship as the people of God. They would be spectators of the struggle for Canaan, without so much as raising a finger to help.

2. (:7) Compromises the Commitment Needed to Pursue the Promise of the Lord

“Now why are you discouraging the sons of Israel from crossing over into the land which the LORD has given them?”

Wiersbe: A successful community or nation depends not only on keeping our word and trusting God for victory; it also depends on the loyalty of people to each other.

Gordon Keddie: Secondly, this was also an incitement of others to sin. It as good as suggested that the Lord need not be obeyed and that his promises could be set aside. . .

If it was all right for Reuben and the others to drop out, then why not all? An example was being set – and it was a bad one. It proclaimed the primacy of self-interest, immediate gratification, avoidance of responsibility and unilateral reneging on solemn commitments.

Iain Duguid: It is the same way with our self-centered affluence. The decision to settle down comfortably to enjoy what we have, without any thought of God’s call on our lives, never simply affects ourselves. It affects our brothers and sisters in the church as well. Each of us has a part to play in setting the spiritual temperature of our own congregation. If I am cool toward God, comfortably satisfied with what I already have, then that coolness will dampen my neighbor’s enthusiasm for God. Equally, if I am on fire for the Lord, passionately pursuing a life of holiness and service, then something of that heat will radiate out to those around me. We never live our lives in a vacuum. Our commitment, or lack of commitment, affects the body as a whole.

B. (:8-13) Denial Based on the Historical Example of Previous Failure and Judgment – Reasoned Response

1. (:8) Experience of Moses in Sending the Spies

“This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land.”

2. (:9) Failure of the Spies in Undermining Faith in the Lord’s Promise

“For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the sons of Israel so that they did not go into the land which the LORD had given them.”

3. (:10-13) Judgment of the Lord

a. (:10) Anger of the Lord

“So the LORD’s anger burned in that day, and He swore, saying,”

b. (:11-12) Disposition of the Judgment

1) (:11) Denial of the Blessing of the Promise

“None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully,”

2) (:12) Exemption for Faithful Caleb and Joshua

“except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have followed the LORD fully.”

c. (:13a) Anger of the Lord

“So the LORD’s anger burned against Israel,”

d. (:13b) Disposition of the Judgment

“and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD was destroyed.”

C. (:14-15) Denial Based on Assumption of Evil Motives and Expectation of Destructive Outcome

1. (:14) Assumption of Evil Motives

“Now behold, you have risen up in your fathers' place, a brood of sinful men, to add still more to the burning anger of the LORD against Israel.”

Cf. references of Jesus – **Matt 12:34**

2. (:15) Expectation of Destructive Outcome

“For if you turn away from following Him, He will once more abandon them in the wilderness; and you will destroy all these people.”

III. (:16-27) COMPROMISING NEGOTIATIONS BASED ON CREATIVE AND REASONABLE PROPOSAL – BUT WHAT ABOUT THE REVEALED WILL OF GOD?

A. (:16-19) Revised Proposal by the Two Tribes

1. (:16) Commitment to Dwell in Trans-Jordan Territory

“Then they came near to him and said, ‘We will build here sheepfolds for our livestock and cities for our little ones;’”

It appears that they no longer are presenting their case to the entire body of Israelite leaders (including Eleazar the priest), but are making a private argument to Moses alone.

2. (:17) Commitment to Lead the Canaan Conquest Campaign

“but we ourselves will be armed ready to go before the sons of Israel, until we have brought them to their place, while our little ones live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land.”

3. (:18) Commitment to Solidarity with Inheritance Hopes of Fellow Israelites

“We will not return to our homes until every one of the sons of Israel has possessed his inheritance.”

Dennis Cole: The two positive statements of building and contributing troops for the upcoming conquest are balanced by two negative statements that confirm their intent to aid their fellow tribesmen. They would not return home to their newly allotted Transjordan inheritance until the conquest was complete, and they would not expect to receive an inheritance in the land of Canaan, though its territory proper was the Promised Land. The eastern border of the Israelite inheritance, as delineated clearly in **34:11–12**, was the Jordan River and the eastern shorelines of the Sea of Galilee and the

Dead Sea. The land they desired and eventually occupied was across the Jordan from “*the land that the Lord had given to them*” (vv. 7, 9).

4. (:19) Commitment to Restrict Inheritance to Trans-Jordan Territory

“For we will not have an inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has fallen to us on this side of the Jordan toward the east.”

R. K. Harrison: Convinced that their well-thought-out plan had nothing to do with either secession from the twelve tribes or rebellion against God’s will, the petitioners approached Moses and reassured him of their integrity as member tribes of the nation. Their primary concern was to take advantage of the rich terrain as a source of food and to construct sheepfolds of stone as well as rebuild some of the ruined cities. This proposal could be of tactical importance for the nation, since it would afford protection for Israel’s eastern flank once the other tribes had possessed Canaan.

Iain Duguid: It is important to hear the different tone of voice that was present in their response. This was not merely a grudging acquiescence to Moses’ rebuke on their part but rather a **complete change of heart**. The Reubenites and Gadites promised to hasten to equip themselves to lead Israel into the conflict (v. 17) and to remain on the field of combat until every single one of the Israelites received their inheritance (v. 18). They thus took up the challenge to provide leadership for the community of faith in the ongoing struggle and to persevere in that struggle until every one of their brothers and sisters had received what God promised.

B. (:20-24) Release from Long Term Canaan Obligations Issued by Moses

1. (:20-23) Carry Out Your Obligations to Israel

a. (:20-22) Permission

1) (:20-22a) Fulfil Short Term Obligations to Conquer Canaan

“So Moses said to them, ‘If you will do this, if you will arm yourselves before the LORD for the war, 21 and all of you armed men cross over the Jordan before the LORD until He has driven His enemies out from before Him, 22 and the land is subdued before the LORD,’”

2) (:22b) Freedom from Long Term Canaan Obligations

“then afterward you shall return and be free of obligation toward the LORD and toward Israel, and this land shall be yours for a possession before the LORD.”

b. (:23) Warning

“But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the LORD, and be sure your sin will find you out.”

Iain Duguid: The passage also reminds us of a fundamental certainty of the universe when it says, “*Be sure your sin will find you out*” (v. 23). Sin is a tireless pursuer when

it comes to seek its just payment: like a shark that smells blood, it will never leave a wounded swimmer alone. It comes on relentlessly, seeking its wages, which are nothing less than eternal, spiritual death. Yet the fact is that for all of us who are in Christ, our sins will never find us out. On the cross every one of those sins found Christ, and they tore him apart physically, emotionally, spiritually. That is why he hung there alone, abandoned, empty. All of our unbelief, all of our self-centeredness, all of our self-serving, all of our lust and gossip and lies, all of our pride and our grumbling—all of our sin descended on him and assaulted him on the cross, extracting the due penalty from him for our failures.

Robert Rayburn: [Points out that this phrase actually is **designed for believers** – so he offers an alternative interpretation to that of Duguid which I would agree with] *“Be sure your sins will find you out,”* is a reality *for Christians, for you and for me.* Now, to be sure, this is, like so many other biblical statements like it, a generality. Everyone of our sins is not found out, every one of our secrets is not eventually disclosed, though, of course, it can be said that everyone will be accounted for at the Judgment Day. But it remains a truth of life and Moses is reminding us of the fact. We can’t hide our sins from God and we can’t prevent him from disclosing them to others or forcing us to face the consequences of them. I don’t know how many times I have seen this truth – the truth that Moses so memorably encapsulates in a single line: *“Be sure your sins will find you out”* – I say, I don’t know how many times I have seen this truth demonstrated to the devastation of Christian lives. God will not be mocked. *Whatever a man sows that shall he also reap.* Paul wrote that to Christians and meant much the same by his words as Moses meant by his here.

2. (:24) Carry Out Your Plans to Possess the Trans-Jordan Territory

*“Build yourselves cities for your little ones,
and sheepfolds for your sheep;
and do what you have promised.”*

C. (:25-27) Response of Commitment by Two Tribes

1. (:25) Summary Commitment

*“And the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben spoke to Moses, saying,
‘Your servants will do just as my lord commands.’”*

2. (:26) Commitment to Occupy Trans-Jordan Territory

*“Our little ones, our wives, our livestock and all our cattle
shall remain there in the cities of Gilead;”*

3. (:27) Commitment to Participate in Canaan Conquest Campaign

*“while your servants, everyone who is armed for war, will cross over
in the presence of the LORD to battle, just as my lord says.”*

**IV. (:28-32) COMPROMISING ACCEPTANCE WITH AGREED UPON
CONDITIONS COMMUNICATED TO THE OTHER LEADERS OF ISRAEL**

A. (:28-30) Spelling Out the Terms of the Compromise Agreement

1. (:28) Summary of the Agreement

“So Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, and to Joshua the son of Nun, and to the heads of the fathers' households of the tribes of the sons of Israel.”

Moses did not solicit their input; he did not inquire of the Lord via the Urim and Thummin of Eleazar the priest; he just dictated the terms of the agreement.

Timothy Ashley: The group that Moses summons as witnesses is the same group that will divide the land in **34:16–29**. Moses commanded. He brought this group in not only as witnesses to the agreement between Israel and Gad and Reuben, but also as the people who would be responsible for carrying out the stipulations of the covenant, since he was soon to die (cf. **27:12–14**). If Gad and Reuben comply with the terms as agreed, then Eleazar, Joshua, and the other leaders are to make sure that they are allowed to return to Transjordan to their dependents there, receiving it as their inheritance.

2. (:29) Conditions Meriting Possession of Trans-Jordan Territory

“And Moses said to them, ‘If the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben, everyone who is armed for battle, will cross with you over the Jordan in the presence of the LORD, and the land will be subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession;’”

3. (:30) Conditions Defaulting to Possession of Canaanite Territory

“but if they will not cross over with you armed, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.”

B. (:31-32) Stipulating to Obey the Terms of the Compromising Agreement

1. (:31) Viewed as Obedience to the Lord

“And the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben answered, saying, ‘As the LORD has said to your servants, so we will do.’”

2. (:32) Viewed as Acted Out in the Presence of the Lord

“We ourselves will cross over armed in the presence of the LORD into the land of Canaan, and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us across the Jordan.”

R. K. Harrison: The result was an oral contact containing all the stipulations of the one negotiated privately with Moses and ratified by an oath sworn by the petitioners in public. As events turned out, these two tribes were as good as their word (**Josh. 4:12-13; 22:1-6**).

V. (:33-42) COMPROMISING POSSESSION OF THE LAND EAST OF THE JORDAN

A. (:33) Summary of Possession Granted to Tribes of Gad, Reuben and Manasseh

“So Moses gave to them, to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben and to the half-tribe of Joseph's son Manasseh, the kingdom of Sihon, king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og, the king of Bashan, the land with its cities with their territories, the cities of the surrounding land.”

MacArthur: Once the agreement was reached with Reuben and Gad concerning settlement on the E side of the Jordan, the half tribe of Manasseh, also rich with flocks, joined in seeking land in that territory. However, vv. 39-42 indicate that Manasseh conquered cities not yet taken and settled in the northern area of Gilead.

B. (:34-38) Possession Granted to Sons of Gad and Sons of Reuben

1. (:34-36) Sons of Gad

“And the sons of Gad built Dibon and Ataroth and Aroer, 35 and Atrothshophan and Jazer and Jogbehah, 36 and Beth-nimrah and Beth-haran as fortified cities, and sheepfolds for sheep.”

2. (:37-38) Sons of Reuben

“And the sons of Reuben built Heshbon and Elealeh and Kiriathaim, 38 and Nebo and Baal-meon-- their names being changed-- and Sibmah, and they gave other names to the cities which they built.”

Raymond Brown: An intriguing postscript says that some of the old cities conquered in the east Jordan region were given new names (38). It was not appropriate for committed Israelite people to live in towns such as Nebo and Baal Meon, dedicated to pagan deities. These people who settled on the east side of the river wanted to make a fresh start by living in communities that removed all traces of paganism. They acknowledged the Lord's goodness in giving them a new land.

C. (:39-42) Possession Granted to Sons of Manasseh

1. (:39-40) Sons of Machir

a. (:39)

“And the sons of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it.”

b. (:40)

“So Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh, and he lived in it.”

2. (:41) Jair

“And Jair the son of Manasseh went and took its towns, and called them Havvoth-jair.”

3. (:42) Nobah

*“And Nobah went and took Kenath and its villages,
and called it Nobah after his own name.”*

Robert Rayburn: If you have a map in the back of your Bible that shows the territory allotted the twelve tribes, you will find that Reuben settled east of the northern half of the Dead Sea, Gad north of Reuben, and Manasseh north of Gad from the bottom of the Sea of Galilee southward and eastward.

* * * * *

DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What caused Moses to so dramatically change his stance regarding this Trans-Jordan land request?
- 2) If this story seems to be presented in an overall positive light, why should we have any question about the wisdom of this contractual agreement?
- 3) What type of complexity has arisen from any questionable decisions in your own life?
- 4) Why would these two tribes have assumed that this Trans-Jordan territory could better support their livestock than some inheritance within the boundaries of the promised land?

* * * * *

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Robert Rayburn: This chapter is all about motivation and good reasons to obey the Lord and keep the promises you have made to him.

Wiersbe: We can't help wondering if these Transjordanic tribes made a wise choice. They were outside the land of promise and separated from the rest of the nation. They made their choice only on the basis of personal gain: the land was good for their flocks and herds. Like Lot, they were walking by sight and not by faith (**Gen. 13:10-11**). The tribes did keep their promise, but in spite of that, their location across the Jordan created some problems (**Josh. 22**).

According to **Hebrews 4**, claiming the inheritance in the Promised Land is an illustration of the different ways believers today relate to the will of God and the inheritance He has for us now in Jesus Christ. . . God wanted His people to be like the new generation that trusted God, entered the land, claimed the victory, and enjoyed the blessings.

C. H. M.: The fact recorded in this chapter has given rise to considerable discussion. Various have been the opinions advanced in reference to the conduct of the two tribes and a half. Were they right, or were they wrong in choosing their inheritance on the wilderness side of Jordan? This is the question. Was their acting in this matter the expression of power, or of weakness? How are we to form a sound judgment in this case?

In the first place, where was Israel's proper portion – their divinely destined inheritance? Most surely on the other side of Jordan, in the land of Canaan. Well, then, ought not this fact to have sufficed? Would or could a really true heart – a heart that thought and felt and judged with God – have entertained the idea of selecting a portion other than that which God had allotted and bestowed? Impossible. Hence, then, we need not to go further in order to have a divine judgment on this subject. It was a mistake, a failure, a stopping short of the divine mark, on the part of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, to choose any boundary-line short of the river Jordan. They were governed, in their conduct, by worldly and selfish considerations – by the sight of their eyes – by carnal motives. They surveyed “the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead,” and they estimated it entirely according to their own interests, and without any reference to the judgment and will of God. Had they been simply looking to God, the question of settling down short of the river Jordan would never have been raised at all.

But when people are not simple, not true-hearted, they get into circumstances which give rise to all sorts of questions. It is a great matter to the enabled, by divine grace, to pursue a line of action, and to tread a path so unequivocal, as that no question can be raised. It is our holy and happy privilege so to carry ourselves that no complication may ever arise. The secret of so doing is to walk with God, and thus to have our conduct wholly governed by His Word. . .

And now let us look at the consequences of this line of action. Let the reader turn to **Joshua xxii**. Here we have the first sorrowful effect of the equivocal conduct of Reuben and Gad. They must needs build an altar – “*a great altar to see to,*” lest in time to come their brethren might disown them. What does all this prove? It proves that they were all wrong in taking up their position on this side of Jordan. . . if further proof were needed, it is furnished by the fact that they were the very first to fall into the enemy's hands. (See **1 Kings xxii. 3.**)

Raymond Brown: [He sees the situation as one where the tribes **repented** on the basis of the exhortation by Moses.]

Failure exposed (32:1-15)

- Failure to conquer selfishness (**32:5**)
- Failure to encourage others (**32:7**)
- Failure to learn from yesterday's mistakes (**32:8–11**)
- Failure to follow the example of God's best people (**32:12**)

- Failure to discern God’s estimate of their sin (32:14)
- Failure to pursue the Lord’s will (32:15)
- Failure to realize when the enemy is at work

Failure averted (32:16–42)

This story, unlike others in Numbers, has a happy outcome. The leaders of Reuben and Gad paid careful attention to the forthright things Moses said, and came back to the old leader with a better proposition. The two tribes acknowledged the truth of what Moses had shared in his eloquent and persuasive preaching. The four steps in their radical change of outlook are as relevant in our Christian lives as in the experience of these travelers over 3,000 years ago.

- Repentance – changing their mind:
 - o about themselves
 - o about the Lord
 - o about others
 - o about life
- Obedience (vs. 17, 25, 27, 31) – declaration of loyal service
- Surrender (vs. 18)
- Trust – courageous faith

Peter Wallace: Gad and Reuben have offered a compromise plan. Compromise can be a good thing when you are following the LORD. But compromise can also be a bad thing – when you are using compromise to avoid following the LORD! Moses does not know their hearts. But because he knows the deceitfulness of the heart, he adds this warning – if you are doing this to set yourself up for rebellion – then be sure your sin will find you out! If you are distancing yourself from others so as to make your sin easier – be sure your sin will find you out!

vv. 25-27 -- This is the center of the narrative. Gad and Reuben accept the compromise – ratifying the plan – with all but one of the key phrases used once:

- “*Gad and Reuben*” (v25)
- “*pass over*” (v27)
- “*every man armed for war*” (v27)
- “before the LORD” (v27)

Only one is missing: there is no reference to the **inheritance**. After all, the central feature of this compromise is that Gad and Reuben will have no inheritance in the Promised Land. And that is the chief feature of the compromise that Moses highlights when he reports on the compromise to Eleazar and the heads of the fathers’ houses. . .

Where are your **priorities**? Please notice: Moses is not saying that Gad and Reuben are sinning. Just like Paul, in **1 Corinthians 7**, will say that the married man’s interests are divided. The single man or woman can devote him or herself entirely to Christ. The married man or woman must be concerned about his or her spouse. It is not a sin to have divided interests. The problem only comes when you allow your “other” interests to draw you away from Christ. Compromise does not have to result in disobedience!

There may be times when you have deeply held convictions – and yet you find yourself in a situation where someone else doesn't agree. One of Moses' deepest convictions is that Israel belongs in the Promised Land. Gad and Reuben seem to think that they can

still worship God just fine from Gilead. And **verse 31** would seem to confirm their opinion. . .

Even with that “happy ending” – I think that you are supposed to come away from **Numbers 32** (and **Joshua 22**) a little **conflicted**. It's a good thing that Gad and Reuben are following the LORD. They obeyed! Given how rarely that happens in Israel's history, that's reason to celebrate! But they are living outside the Land – away from the promises of God – away from the altar of the LORD – the tabernacle of God's presence. Compromise is always dangerous. But compromise is not always disobedience!

TEXT: Numbers 33:50-56

TITLE: FINAL MARCHING ORDERS FOR CONQUERING AND POSSESSING CANAAN

BIG IDEA:
OCCUPYING HOLY LAND REQUIRES EXTREME EXTERMINATION OF THREATS TO COVENANT WORSHIP

INTRODUCTION:

These final marching orders issued by God to His elect nation Israel through His chosen leader Moses show that God doesn't mess around when it comes to spiritual threats. The older generation had failed in their calling to possess the promised land. Now a new generation is prepared on the banks of the Jordan to cross over and obey God's directives and receive His gracious gift. But the military campaign required to possess the holy land includes very severe measures. The Canaanites must be conquered and driven out of the land or they will seduce Israel into some type of syncretistic adultery. In addition the objects associated with idolatry and the shrines for pagan worship must be completely destroyed. Only then will God's blessing be assured.

Gordon Keddie: Israel was called by God to be the instrument of his judgment upon peoples whose sin he had deemed to have “*reached its full measure*” (cf. **Genesis 15:16; Exodus 23:23; 34:11-14; Leviticus 20:22-24**). It is important to interpret and apply this law with sound biblical proportion. . .

The destruction of Canaan points to the inevitability of the last judgment and, while that must warn those who have ears to hear to “*flee the wrath to come*”, its true application stops with the starkly simple point that God is just and his justice will not be denied.

Timothy Ashley: Regulations for Living in Canaan -- The promised land has been Israel's goal throughout the book of Numbers. It is only fitting, therefore, that the last section of the book (**33:50–36:13**) deals specifically with settlement in Canaan. Many of the themes that are mentioned here are developed in the deuteronomistic literature (Deuteronomy, Joshua–Kings). In a way, **33:50–36:13** anticipates and introduces this deuteronomistic literature.

The section breaks down into two groups of three laws each, carefully introduced by the clause “*and Yahweh spoke to Moses*” (wayedābbēr YHWH 'el–mōšeh, **33:50; 34:1, 16; 35:1, 9; cf. 36:6**) and surrounded by the phrase “*on the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho*” (be'areḥōt mō'ab 'al–yardēn yerēhō, **33:50; 35:1; 36:13**).

Robert Rayburn: Remember, Israel is now encamped on the Plains of Moab, awaiting Moses' death and the command to advance into the Promised Land. These final chapters in Numbers wrap up the preparations for the Conquest. The chapter . . . concludes with some specific instructions for Israel once she has entered Canaan.

(:50) PROLOGUE – FINAL COMMAND TO CONQUER AND DISTRIBUTE THE PROMISED LAND INTRODUCED

A. Divine Mandate

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses”

Gordon Keddie: First of all, it was a law for Israel from God. There is no evading the fact and therefore no reason to be squeamish about what it required. We are not superior to God. Our justice is not fairer than his. We have no reason to be embarrassed by his destruction of reprobate peoples.

B. Geographic Setting

1. Plains of Moab

“in the plains of Moab”

2. Across the Jordan from Jericho

“by the Jordan opposite Jericho,”

C. Verbal Instructions

“saying,”

I. (:51-53) RADICAL COMMISSION TO UTTERLY CONQUER AND POSSESS CANAAN

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them,”

God speaks to His people through the channel of His prophetic servant.

A. (:51) Engagement of the Military Campaign to Possess Canaan

“When you cross over the Jordan into the land of Canaan,”

Jeff Stephens: first of all we have the challenge to take possession of the land. That seems to be the key theme. For the word to take possession/*yarash* is used several times. The thought in **v.51** is not if they cross, but when they cross as they will. The crossing is a certainty because God said they would and He has given the land to them. The word is a participle -- implying the ongoing process of the crossing and the purpose of the crossing, namely to enter the land.

<https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/212142-take-possession-of-your-inheritance-numbers-33:50-56>

B. (:52) Elimination of Threats to Covenant Worship

1. Drive Out the Inhabitants so They are No Longer a Threat

“then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you,”

R. K. Harrison: Idol worship was strictly prohibited (**Ex. 20:4-5**), and for this reason it was impossible for Israel to contemplate peaceful coexistence with idolaters. They had

to be dispossessed, because their land was God's gift to His people and must be occupied as such. Before He could rejoice in it, the territory would have to be sanctified by the presence of the kingdom of priests and holy nation that He had established by His covenant with Israel. The subsequent history of the nation shows tragically the extent to which they were unable or unwilling to fulfill these commands.

Jeff Stephens: Secondly, there is the manner in which they are to take the land, it is summed up in four verbs that are all causal in effect. They indicate the responsibility for taking possession of the land by driving out the inhabitants and destroying any trace of their idolatry lies with the people of Israel. It was a personal and corporate activity -- corporate in scope and personal in practice. Everyone had to do their part and everyone's part impacted the success of the whole. Just like a team. If one member fails in doing their job the whole team fails. So while the first verb is hifil-dispossess the inhabitants of the land as a corporate, national endeavor it also has personal specific actions like destroying specific images etc. So then we move to the process or manner of taking possession of their inheritance as indicated by these four verbs. . .

The word drive out/*yarash*-means to take possession of or dispossess. It is not just to displace, like when an object is placed into water it displaces a certain amount of water, in other words the water and the object cannot occupy the same space. In this case as the people push into Canaan the inhabitants must at the same time be either pushed out or killed, resulting in Israel increasingly occupying the land area at the same time removing or forcing out the previous inhabitants. The word is also translated inherit. For an inheritance to take effect the owner has to die in order to pass the land to the heir. Which implies the original owner (Canaanites) had to die. Or if we note God is the owner, obviously He cannot die, but someone must die in His place, in this case the Canaanites. God, as the owner, gives over what He had loaned to the Canaanites for a time and until He was ready to pass the land on to His children, Israel. So then taking possession, inheriting, being the necessary first verb in the sequence of verbs requires the act of the heir to actually take possession. And so the command to take possession necessarily follows the act of crossing into the land.

2. Destroy Their Idols so They are No Longer a Temptation

a. Their Figured Stones

“and destroy all their figured stones,”

b. Their Molten Images

“and destroy all their molten images”

3. Demolish Their Worship Shrines so They are No Longer a Distraction

“and demolish all their high places;”

Raymond Brown: There was no room for syncretistic worship whereby they could acknowledge their unique Lord and also pay their respects to idols. All their carved images and cast idols must be destroyed, and the invaders must demolish all their high places with their pornographic Asherah poles. Baalism was a fertility cult, maintaining

that worship of its god would guarantee an abundant harvest. To procure such benefits its worshippers used shrine prostitutes and indulged in degrading sexual practices at these high places. But the Israelite people had entered into a covenant with their God, and a prohibition of adultery was part of the Decalogue's covenant agreement.

The worship of Baal was not only erroneous but offensive to Israel's holy God. Its corrupting influence would have a destructive effect on God's people unless they had the will to deal drastically with those immoral shrines as soon as they conquered the land. In addition to its offensive sexual connotations, Baalism included the practice of child sacrifice, yet another breach of the commandments: *'You shall not murder.'* Preaching to the community before they crossed the river, Moses warned them about Canaan's *'detestable ways'*. Their rituals were physically brutal as well as morally depraved, and the Israelite invaders were to root out such barbaric practices. In order to accomplish this punitive destruction, the Israelites were assured that *'the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you'*.

The Christian believer has something to learn from this divine command. There can be little progress in holiness without a radical rejection of sin. Jesus made that clear in his teaching and the New Testament writers applied his message to life in their morally damaging first-century world. Ours is an even more depraved society; the call to holiness is a divine imperative, not an optional invitation.

Jeff Stephens: The third verb is pluck down, exterminate, demolish/*samad*. This word always means to destroy or annihilate and is always used in passages dealing with vengeance or the judgment of God. It usually is the result of sudden catastrophe as in warfare. They are to demolish the *'high places'* *bamah*. These were worship areas usually a structure of some sort like a platform or even could refer to a building such as a sanctuary or an altar. These were normally placed on the heights like ridges or hills. These would have been supplied with the corresponding idols and stone pillars, etc. It would have been like a temple or shrine. These were the places of worship. So then as they entered the land they were to destroy the images, idols of metal, stone, wood, the places of worship and the even the imaginations or thinking behind all of these gods. They were to destroy anything that would cause them to worship something other than God.

This verse clearly depicts and instructs the total elimination from our lives of anything that competes with God for our worship.

J. Ligon Duncan: God is commanding the children of Israel to wipe out every potential rival to His rule in their hearts and to the purity of their worship and service of Him. It's so important to understand that this continues to be a New Testament principle, although it's applied in a very different way. Our warfare is not against the peoples and the others who are idolaters in the land as much as it is against the world and the flesh and the devil and their temptation of us to follow in their way. So, for instance in **Romans 12:2**, the Apostle Paul calls us not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Or, Paul in **II Corinthians 7:1** will remind

us of the call that God has issued to us not to emulate the ungodly around us but to walk in purity of life. And again he does the same thing in **Ephesians 4:1** and in **verses 17-19**, where he calls upon us not to live like the Gentiles around us, but to live in godliness. And of course the Lord Jesus Christ made the same point in His own teaching when He reminded us that if there was anything that tempted us to infidelity towards God, that we were to deal with it severely and radically. And so He could say, *“If your right hand offends you, cut it off and cast it away. If your right eye offends you, pluck it out and cast it away.”* This is a demand for an uncompromising approach to sin.

C. (:53) Emancipation of the Land for Permanent Possession as Promised

1. Possession of the Land by Force

“and you shall take possession of the land and live in it.”

2. Promise of the Land Gift Fulfilled

“for I have given the land to you to possess it.”

II. (:54) RENEWED COMMITMENT TO GRANT THE LAND AS A DISTRIBUTED INHERITANCE

A. Distribution Sovereignly Controlled by the Lord

“And you shall inherit the land by lot according to your families;”

Ronald Allen: The manner of the distribution of the land was to be by lot, with the assurance that the lot would not be by chance but by the disposition of the Lord. In this way the people would be able to take possession of the land as a lasting inheritance.

Raymond Brown: The negative command about the eradication of evil is followed by a positive one concerning the distribution of the newly conquered land (**53–54**). Although the land was God’s gift (**53**), without clear instructions the allocation of tribal territory might provoke serious disharmony and rivalry. It was a unique experience for these nomads to possess their own land, and some guidance had to be given regarding equitable distribution.

B. Distribution Based on Size of the Tribe

1. To the Larger

“to the larger you shall give more inheritance,”

2. To the Smaller

“and to the smaller you shall give less inheritance.”

C. Distribution Irrevocable

“Wherever the lot falls to anyone, that shall be his.”

D. Distribution Tied to Tribal Identity

“You shall inherit according to the tribes of your fathers.”

III. (:55-56) REVERSING CAVEAT = OBEY OR SUFFER A SIMILAR FATE

A. (:55a) Failure Will Have Consequences

“But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you,”

B. (:55b-56) Consequences Will Be Severe

1. (:55b) Recurring Opposition

a. Severe Pain

“then it shall come about that those whom you let remain of them will become as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides,”

R. K. Harrison: two different Hebrew words for “thorn” are used. The expressions describe something that could disable and irritate the chosen people culturally and especially spiritually.

Timothy Ashley: As the splinter or thorn is small but sharp and can cause more than discomfort, including infection and (in the eyes) blindness, so even a small remnant of Canaanites will cause great problems in Israel’s future. It therefore will be foolish to allow the Canaanites to remain in the land.

Ronald Allen: images that Joshua uses in his farewell address; see **Josh 23:13**.

b. Severe Trouble

“and they shall trouble you in the land in which you live.”

2. (:56) Reversing of Fortunes

“And it shall come about that as I plan to do to them, so I will do to you.

Gordon Keddie: Here again, a general principle is dramatically demonstrated: if we are not killing sin, it will be killing us. This is where mortification of sin comes in (not in **33:50-53**). Our sin will find us out, if we do not deal with it faithfully.

Raymond Brown: The problem blighted the spiritual life of God’s people across the centuries, right up to their enforced exile to Babylon. At that time, this crucial warning came to tragic fruition. In order to rid them of offensive idolatry and syncretistic worship, the Lord did to his people what he had planned for the Canaanites: he expelled them from the land. From bitter experience, his people learnt that God keeps his word, both in benevolent promise and threatened judgment.

Dennis Cole: What lay ahead for the nation on this last stage of the journey on the victory march to the Promised Land was a challenge of faith. Faithfulness like that which was depicted of the nation in **Numbers 1–10** would result in their experiencing the fullness of God’s blessing in the land flowing with milk and honey. Unity and harmony, celebration and worship, would be theirs. But if they rebelled against God as that first generation did in **Numbers 11–25**, then discord and disparagement would be their woeful conclusion to the story. The words were ominously prophetic.

Charlie Garrett: The very fact that they have failed thus far calls into question their future in Canaan. History is often the best gauge of future performance. Further, the Lord tells them exactly what the consequences for failure will be.

Ronald Allen: These words, at the end of the travel itinerary, are most threatening indeed! For the present – that is, the time of the writing of the Book of Numbers – the outcome is uncertain. But the prospects are good. The second generation has fully replaced their erring fathers and mothers. The land lies before them as they wait in the final staging area. There is the Jordan. Over yonder is Jericho, the firstfruits of the land. And with them is the eternal Yahweh!

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DEVOTIONAL QUESTIONS:

- 1) What types of threats to covenant worship of the One True God are we called to combat?
- 2) What does possession of the promised land look like for NT believers today?
- 3) How does this passage speak to contemporary temptations like pornography?
- 4) Where does the church experience recurring pain and trouble because of failure to obey God's directives?

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QUOTES FOR REFLECTION:

Warren Wiersbe: What were the reasons for the extermination of these nations?

- 1) For one thing, this was God's judgment because of their wickedness (**Gen. 15:15-16; Lev. 18:24-28**).
- 2) A second reason was that the way might be cleared for the tribes of Israel to claim their inheritance (**Num. 33:54**). . . God had to wipe out the pagan societies in Canaan so that His people might move in and build a nation that would glorify God. The Promised Land would be the stage on which God would display His power, pour out His blessings, send His truth, and one day send His Son to die for the sins of the world.
- 3) A third reason for the extermination of the pagan nations was to remove temptation from the people of Israel who were prone to worship idols (**vv. 55-56**). During their wilderness march, the Jews revealed their appetite for the things of Egypt, and at Baal Peor, they succumbed to the seductions of Baal worship. If the pagan shrines were left standing, it wouldn't take long for Israel to forsake the Lord and start worshipping idols.

Unfortunately, Israel didn't obey God's orders and ended up being snared by the practices of the heathen peoples left in the land (**Jud. 2:6-15**).

Dennis Cole: The seventh and final cycle of the victory march from Egypt to the Land of Canaan comes in the form of a challenge, the list that remains to be written by Joshua, Moses' successor. The chiasmic structure of the future and final stage of the Israelite victory march from Egypt to the Promised Land has been duly noted by Milgrom. As they departed the plains of Moab, led by the Lord and the symbol of his presence in the ark of the covenant in crossing the Jordan River, they would make their encampment at Gilgal from which their task would be to carry out the enclosed instructions for taking possession of their inheritance. The following **outline** is based on Milgrom, with my own modifications:

Introduction: Instructions from the Lord for the Israelites (50–51)

Setting Protasis: When you cross over the Jordan into the Land of Canaan A Possession of the Promised Land (two apodoses with wěhōraštem) (52–53)

- 1 Possessing by Dispossession (wěhōraštem) the Inhabitants of the Land (**52**)
 - a Dispospossess all the inhabitants of the land from before you
 - b Destroy all their carved images
 - b' All their molten images you shall destroy
 - a' All their high places you shall demolish

- 2 Possessing (wěhōraštem) by Inhabiting the Land (**53**)
 - a You shall possess the land and dwell in it
 - b For You I have given the land to possess it.

B Inheritance To Be Divided among the Tribes (54)

- 1 You shall receive the inheritance of the land by lot for your clans
 - a For the large you shall make large its inheritance
 - a' For the small you shall make small its inheritance

- 1' Toward whatever comes out to him there by lot is his By your patriarchal tribes you shall inherit.

A' Dispossession Warning (two apodoses wěhāyâ) (55–56)

- 1 Protasis: If you do not dispospossess the inhabitants of the land from before you
 - a Then it will be (wěhāyâ) that those you allow to remain from them [will be] Splinters in your eyes and thorns in your sides They shall trouble you in the land where you dwell
 - b Then it will be (wěhāyâ) According to what I intended to do to them I will do to you!

David Thompson: Israel is instructed as to how to take possession of the Promised Land. **33:50-56**

This was the goal of this 40 year journey. The goal was to go to the Promised Land and take it. They are specifically given eight instructions:

Instruction #1 - Drive out all inhabitants. **33:52a**

Instruction #2 - Destroy all figured stones. **33:52b**

Instruction #3 - Destroy all molten images. **33:52c**

Instruction #4 - Destroy all high places. **33:52d**

All of the idolatrous places of worship, located in high places, were to be totally and completely destroyed.

Instruction #5 - Take possession of the land. **33:53**

They were to take possession of the land and live in the land.

Instruction #6 - Divide the land by the size of tribal families by lot. **33:54**

Larger tribes need more land and smaller tribes need less land.

Instruction #7 - If you don't drive out inhabitants they will become trouble for you. **33:55**

Instruction #8 - If you don't obey Me, I will do to you what I would have done to them. **33:56**

Here is the answer to why God has not allowed Israel to live and enjoy her land. She will not obey Him. In fact, most of the things in this list of instructions, they did not do.

Chuck Smith: These are the things they were to do.

1. They were to drive out all of the inhabitants.

- a. This seems very severe, until you understand the practices of the people.
- b. These people had no morals, they lived like animals.
- c. Their major gods were the pleasure god of Molech, and the goddess of sex, Ashtoreth.
- d. Their worship involved all types of orgies.
- e. Naturally, there were many unwanted babies born in a culture that was given over to unbridled sexual passions.
- f. These babies would be tossed alive into the bonfires that were ignited for the god Molech.

2. They were to destroy all of the pictures.

- a. The pictures were pornographic and designed to arouse the sexual passions. Thus, God ordered them destroyed.

b. When the archeologists were uncovering the ruins of Pompeii, it was necessary to cover the art on the walls of the common homes to keep the workers from being totally debased.

3. Destroy all of the molten images.

- a. These too were made to be sexually arousing.
- b. If you have ever seen pictures of Ashtarte, or Aphrodite, you know what I mean.
- c. When the archeologists were excavating the city of David that was destroyed by Babylon, in the homes they discovered hundreds of these little pornographic idols. They were a mute confirmation to the book of Jeremiah who continually warned them to turn from their idolatry.

4. Completely destroy their high places. These were their places of worship.

- a. They would build their temples at the tops of the hills, or at the prominent end of the city.
- b. A tell usually looks like a mesa with one end higher than the other.
- c. The reason why the one end is higher, that is where the temple to their god was built.

5. You shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land.

Charlie Garrett: It is, as I said a few minutes ago, a **transitional passage** between the stops of Israel since leaving Sinai, and the appointment of the boundaries of the land, and the naming of the people who would divide it.

Israel was redeemed, Israel received the law, the law pointed to Christ, and Israel rejected Christ. Because of that, they went into the punishment of exile. Now, they are on the border of the land of inheritance with Moses being instructed on the layout and division of it.

It is Moses, representative of the law, who is given the instruction. And yet, Moses will not enter into the inheritance. The law has no part in the inheritance, except for the completion of it.

The man who does the things of the law will live. Christ accomplished the things of the law, and He lives. Thus, He is the embodiment of the law. Moses, standing representative of the law will die outside of the inheritance, in the land of Moab.

Christ did not die in heaven. Rather, He died outside of that inheritance in this fallen world. When He died, the law died with Him because it is fulfilled in Him. Further, His death was not for His sin under the law, but ours. Therefore, in Him is life, not death. Our sin for transgressions of the law dies in Him, and life is granted to us in exchange. For Israel of today, the inheritance is yet ahead, but this is what this is picturing. They can either die under the law, represented by Moses dying outside of Canaan, or they can die in Christ, represented by the entering of the promise.

Jeff Stephens: We are called to take possession of our inheritance: to drive out, put to death the deeds of the flesh. We are to kill and put off the sin which so easily besets us. If we don't deal with our sin it lies at the door and will control us. We are either slaves to our flesh or our flesh is a slave to us. Paul makes this clear in Romans 6-8. We must eradicate from our lives all that would tempt us to sin as Israel was to destroy that which was in Canaan. If we don't it will dominate us and ruin our lives.

Identify what sins to deal with, repent of them when you sin, put them to death and replace them with the thinking and actions of righteousness.

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