

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

WANDERINGS

Reflections on the Book of Numbers

EXPANDED EDITION

Eugene Han

*Drawn from more than a decade of shared Quiet Time reflections at
dailyqt.org, and from Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in
Dallas*

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The introduction draws on the introductory notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable, used with gratitude for his lay-accessible scholarship on the text of Scripture.

This Expanded Edition draws on reflections shared over many years by the community of readers at dailyqt.org. The author is grateful to every member of that community whose questions, insights, and encouragement helped shape these pages.

This book reflects the personal study, reflection, and interpretation of its author and is offered for devotional and educational purposes. It is not a substitute for pastoral counsel or formal theological instruction. Where matters of biblical interpretation remain disputed among careful readers of Scripture, the author has noted this and presented his own considered view alongside other views held by faithful Christians, rather than claiming final or exclusive authority on the question.

An earlier edition of this study appeared in the combined volume *Consecrated and Tested: Reflections on Leviticus and Numbers*. This Expanded Edition returns *Wanderings* to a volume of its own, as it first appeared. It follows directly from the previous volume in this series, *Holiness: Reflections on the Book of Leviticus*.

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Preface to the Expanded Edition

A Fuller Conversation

The first edition of this book grew out of a daily practice: reading a few chapters of Scripture each morning, writing down what we noticed, and sharing it with a community of readers at dailyqt.org. Over more than a decade, that community has left thousands of reflections on these same passages: questions, objections, stories, corrections, and moments of genuine discovery. The first edition drew on only a small part of that conversation. This Expanded Edition draws on all of it.

The result is a longer book, and we hope a better one. Every chapter has been rewritten to take in reflections from the wider community, along with further study of the passages they raised. Where the first edition moved quickly past a difficult text, this edition slows down. Where it stated one view on a disputed question, this edition still states the view we hold, but it also presents the other views faithful Christians hold, as fairly as we can. Each chapter now closes with six discussion questions rather than three or four.

Numbers raises more than its share of hard questions, and many of them came up again and again in the conversation behind this book. Why did an eleven-day journey take forty years? How should we read the ritual for a wife suspected of unfaithfulness? Why was Moses kept out of the Promised Land for striking a rock? Was Balaam a true prophet? How can God

command the war against Midian? What do the bronze snake and the cities of refuge teach us about Christ? We have not tried to make these questions disappear. We have tried to take them seriously, to say plainly what we believe the text teaches, and to be honest where the text leaves us with difficulty.

Personal stories from the original reflections have been kept where they serve the text, but names and identifying details have been removed. Commentary on current events that would quickly go out of date has been left out. Throughout, the book speaks in a single voice, but that voice owes a great deal to many readers.

One thing has not changed. This book is still meant to be read alongside an open Bible, one day at a time, and not in place of one. If these pages send you back to Numbers with fresh eyes, and from there to the Savior this book anticipates at every turn, they will have done what they were written to do.

How to Use This Book

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It was written to be read one day at a time, the way it was first written, a chapter at a time over the course of several weeks, alongside an open Bible rather than in place of one. The believers in Berea were commended not simply for their eagerness to hear the Word but for their habit of examining "the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). That daily habit, sustained over years rather than compressed into a season, is the aim of this book and of the Quiet Time practice that produced it.

To help establish that rhythm, we have included, as an appendix at the back of this book, the same daily Bible reading plan we have used at dailyqt.org for well over a decade. It walks through the whole of Scripture in a year, a few chapters at a time, and it does not need to be started in January; you are free to begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. Each of the sixteen chapters in this book lines up with exactly one day on that plan, from Numbers 1–2 on the first day to Numbers 35–36 on the sixteenth, so that this book and your own Bible can move through Numbers together, one day at a time.

Whether you are reading on your own or working through this book with a group, such as one of our Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, we would suggest the following simple rhythm for each day, or for each session if you are meeting weekly:

1. Begin and end in prayer. Ask God, before you open either Bible or book, to teach you something true about Himself that day, and thank Him, when you close both, for whatever He has shown you, even if it is smaller or slower than you expected.

2. Read the assigned Scripture. Using the reading plan in the appendix, read the day's passage directly from your own Bible before turning to our reflections on it. There is no substitute for reading the text itself first, in whatever translation you trust, and letting it raise its own questions before we offer ours.

3. Read the corresponding chapter in this book. Each chapter walks through that day's passage in the order Scripture presents it, drawing out its major movements and, where it seemed useful, the historical background behind them. Treat it as a conversation about the text you just read, not a replacement for it.

4. Answer the discussion questions. Every chapter closes with six questions, enough to fill a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion, though they work just as well as slower journaling prompts for a reader working through the book alone. Some ask you to notice something in the text; most ask you to notice something in yourself. A group short on time may simply choose two or three.

If you are part of a group, we would encourage you to read both the day's Scripture and the corresponding chapter individually during the week, and then use your time together for the fourth step: praying together and working through the discussion questions. That is, after all, how the material in this book first took shape, not in a study or a library, but among ordinary readers asking each other what a passage meant and

why it mattered, week after week, for years. We hope it will do the same for you.

Introduction

Wanderings

If Leviticus is the book many readers abandon, Numbers may be the book many readers misjudge before they open it, expecting either a dry list of statistics or a featureless stretch of desert, and finding instead one of the most eventful and emotionally raw books in the Pentateuch. Exodus began with a story and ended with law; Numbers reverses the pattern, opening with law and procedure before turning, by chapter 11, into one of the most sustained narratives in the Bible. It is the practical outworking, in real time and real rebellion, of everything Leviticus had just prescribed.

The Hebrew title of the book, *Bamidbar*, means "In the Wilderness," and it names the book's true subject better than our English title does. "Numbers" comes to us from the Greek and Latin translators, who named the book for its two great censuses, one at the beginning (chapters 1–4) and one near the end (chapter 26). Those censuses do more than frame the book; they measure something. Read them side by side, and a striking fact emerges. After nearly forty years of wandering, war, plague, and rebellion, Israel's total is almost unchanged, a little over six hundred thousand fighting men at the start and a little over six hundred thousand at the end. The generation that came out of Egypt is gone, yet the nation stands. There is one dramatic exception, the tribe of Simeon, whose numbers fall by nearly two-thirds. We will have reason to ask why when we come to it.

It may help to say a word about how this book handles time, because it will keep the reader oriented through some disorienting stretches. Numbers covers nearly forty years, yet

most of its narrative detail is concentrated at the beginning, in the final weeks at Sinai and the march to Kadesh, and at the end, in the final months on the plains of Moab. The long years of wandering in between pass by in a handful of chapters, largely undated and largely untold. That is typical of Scripture. The amount of time a passage covers has little to do with the space it is given. All of Leviticus takes place in about a month, while the first eleven chapters of Genesis span thousands of years. Jesus' public ministry lasted about three years, yet it fills a large part of the New Testament. God does not measure significance the way we do. "With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Peter 3:8).

The book's center of gravity falls at Kadesh Barnea, where Israel stood at the edge of the Promised Land, only eleven days' journey from Sinai by Moses' own reckoning (Deuteronomy 1:2), and refused to go in. What should have been an eleven-day journey became forty years of dying in the wilderness, one year for each day the spies had spent exploring the land. Nearly everything that happens afterward, including the second generation's return to the same border decades later, has to be read in the shadow of that single failure.

Three things stand out across these chapters. The first is the patience of God with a people who test that patience at nearly every turn. That patience is strength, not weakness. The years of wandering were years of discipline and preparation for the next generation, not simple abandonment of the one that failed. The second is the gravity of unbelief, which Numbers exposes with unflinching honesty: a discontent that spread from person to person through the camp, and a people whose obedience, even at its best, was tangled up with self-interest rather than

wholehearted trust. The third is the discovery, made and remade across the book, that God's people can delay His purposes through their unbelief, but they can never finally prevent them. Every member of the generation that refused the land died in the wilderness exactly as God had said. But their children inherited the promise their parents forfeited.

The first four books of Moses can be read as a progression. Genesis shows the beginnings of faith; Exodus shows faith expressed in redemption, worship, and obedience; Leviticus explains that worship more fully; and Numbers presses home the importance of obedience by showing, in sometimes uncomfortable detail, the roots, the process, and the bitter fruit of disobedience. Many readers have found the whole book summed up in a single line from Romans: "Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God" (Romans 11:22), sternness toward the generation that fell in the wilderness, kindness toward the generation carried through to inherit the land. The New Testament draws two further warnings from these chapters: a warning against presumption, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:12), and a warning against unbelief, "See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12).

This Expanded Edition follows the same pattern as the first: sixteen chapters, one for each daily reading, drawing on more than a decade of Quiet Time reflections shared by the dailyqt.org community and on Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas. Numbers can feel, on a first reading, like leaving a dense forest only to wander into a trackless desert. But there is more story here than in any book since Genesis, and more

honest reckoning with the cost of unbelief than almost anywhere else in the Old Testament. We offer this study as a companion for that reckoning, and we begin it the way Israel's priests were instructed to bless God's people, with words first given in this very book:

*"The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace"*
(Numbers 6:24–26).

Chapter One

Numbers 1–2

With the book of Numbers, we come to the fourth book of Moses. The English title comes from the two great censuses the book records, one at the beginning (chapter 1) and one near the end (chapter 26). But the Hebrew title captures the book's setting better. Jewish readers call it *Bamidbar*, "In the Wilderness," taken from its opening verse. The book spans almost forty years, from the second year after Israel left Egypt until they stood on the plains of Moab, ready at last to enter the Promised Land. In between lie thirty-eight years of wandering, during which the entire adult generation that came out of Egypt died in the desert. By the time of the second census, not one of the men counted in the first remained, except Caleb and Joshua.

Moses later made a remark that sums up the tragedy of the book: "It takes eleven days to go from Horeb to Kadesh Barnea by the Mount Seir road" (Deuteronomy 1:2). An eleven-day journey took forty years. Numbers tells us why.

But the book does not begin with failure. It begins with preparation. "The LORD spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt" (Numbers 1:1). Israel had journeyed hundreds of miles from their slavery in Goshen and now sat at the foot of Mount Sinai. They had received the Law. The tabernacle had been built and consecrated. God was dwelling in the midst of His people. Now it was time to organize them for the march to Canaan.

"Take a census of the whole Israelite community by their clans and families, listing every man by name, one by one. You

and Aaron are to count according to their divisions all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army" (Numbers 1:2–3). A leader from each tribe helped Moses and Aaron. The result: "The total number was 603,550" (Numbers 1:46).

That number is astonishing when we remember where it came from. About four hundred years earlier, God had taken Abraham outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.... So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5). When Jacob went down to Egypt, his family numbered seventy. Now, all descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, Israel had more than six hundred thousand fighting men, suggesting a total population of perhaps two million or more. God had kept His promise.

It is fair to mention that some scholars have questioned whether these numbers should be read at face value. The Hebrew word for "thousand" can also refer to a clan or military unit, and some have proposed that the totals originally counted units rather than individuals, which would make the population much smaller. Those who take this view are not necessarily denying the truth of Scripture; they are wrestling with how an ancient text expressed its figures. We take the numbers as written. The text adds them up carefully, tribe by tribe, and they fit the Bible's own emphasis on the extraordinary multiplication of Israel in Egypt (Exodus 1:7). But we can acknowledge that faithful interpreters have weighed the question differently.

Consider the setting of this census. Pictures of Mount Sinai and the surrounding area show a desolate, rocky desert. It is hard to imagine a worse place for a nation of two million to live. There were no cities to supply them, no farms to feed them, no

rivers to water their flocks. They were entirely dependent on God. That was exactly the point. God had sent the plagues on Egypt, parted the sea, and rained bread from heaven, all to teach Israel to trust Him. The encampment in this "vast and dreadful wilderness" (Deuteronomy 8:15) was another lesson in trust. God was preparing His people for the journey ahead and for the fulfillment of His covenant with Abraham.

Notice, too, the purpose of the census. It was not a general population count. It counted "all the men in Israel who are twenty years old or more and able to serve in the army." God had promised to bring Israel into the land of Canaan, and He had also told them that they would have to drive out its inhabitants. This was an army being prepared for war.

That detail becomes important when we compare this census with another one centuries later. In 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21, King David ordered a census of Israel's fighting men, and it was condemned as sin. Yet on the surface it looks almost identical to what Moses did here. What was the difference? The difference was the heart behind it. Moses counted Israel because God commanded him to, for a purpose God had given. David counted Israel on his own initiative, apparently out of pride, trusting in the size of his army rather than in the Lord. Even Joab, David's hard-bitten general, sensed that something was wrong: "May the LORD your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may my lord the king live to see it. But why does my lord the king want to do such a thing?" (2 Samuel 24:3). Afterward, "David was conscience-stricken after he had counted the fighting men, and he said to the LORD, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done'" (2 Samuel 24:10). God sent a plague, and seventy thousand people died.

The same action, counting people, can be either obedience or idolatry, depending on what is being trusted. Numbers, budgets, attendance figures, and statistics are not wrong in themselves. Wise leaders count and plan. But when we begin to trust in our numbers rather than in God, we have crossed the line David crossed. "Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7).

The Bible's censuses also trace the arc of Israel's history. David's census counted "one million one hundred thousand men who could handle a sword" in Israel, along with 470,000 in Judah (1 Chronicles 21:5), not including Levi and Benjamin. Israel's population had roughly doubled since the wilderness. But when the exiles returned from Babylon centuries later, "The whole company numbered 42,360" (Ezra 2:64), along with their servants and singers. A nation that had once numbered in the millions had been reduced to a small fraction of its former size, scattered across a foreign empire for seventy years. It is remarkable that such a community did not simply dissolve into the surrounding nations and disappear from history. That it did not is a testimony to God's faithfulness. He preserved a remnant, and through that remnant His plan of redemption continued.

And one more census deserves mention. "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1). Because of that census, Joseph traveled with Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and there Jesus was born, fulfilling the prophecy of Micah: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel" (Micah 5:2). A pagan emperor counted his subjects, and

without knowing it, set the stage for the birth of the King of kings.

It is amazing to watch God's plans unfold. Whether through the obedient or the disobedient, through Moses or David or Caesar, His sovereign purpose always prevails.

The census lists every man "by name, one by one." That phrase appears again and again in chapter 1. Israel was not counted as an anonymous mass. Each person was known and named. Jesus assures us of the same personal attention: "Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Luke 12:7), and "He calls his own sheep by name" (John 10:3). In the great census of God's people, no one is lost in the crowd.

One tribe was missing from the count: "The ancestral tribe of the Levites, however, was not counted along with the others" (Numbers 1:47). Instead, "appoint the Levites to be in charge of the tabernacle of the covenant law—over all its furnishings and everything belonging to it" (Numbers 1:50). The Levites were not counted in this census because they would not serve in the army, and because, as we learn later, they received no inheritance of land among the other tribes (Numbers 26:62). The size of each tribe's inheritance would depend on its numbers, and the Levites' inheritance was the Lord Himself.

That does not mean the Levites were never counted. In chapter 3 they are counted separately, by a different standard and for a different purpose, and we will look at that count in the next chapter. The purpose of a list determines who is on it. Reading the different censuses together keeps us from imagining contradictions where none exist.

The Levites had a unique role in the camp: "The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the

covenant law so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelite community. The Levites are to be responsible for the care of the tabernacle of the covenant law" (Numbers 1:53). They formed a protective ring around God's dwelling. As we saw in Leviticus, approaching the holy God carelessly could bring death. The Levites stood between the tabernacle and the people, guarding the holy things so that no one would stumble into judgment. Their presence was a mercy.

And so the chapter ends: "The Israelites did all this just as the LORD commanded Moses" (Numbers 1:54). At this point in the story, Israel was still obeying.

Chapter 2 describes how the tribes were to camp and march. "The Israelites are to camp around the tent of meeting some distance from it, each of them under their standard and holding the banners of their family" (Numbers 2:2). The tabernacle stood at the center. Immediately around it camped the Levites. Beyond them, the twelve tribes were arranged in four groups of three, one group on each side: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun on the east; Reuben, Simeon, and Gad on the south; Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin on the west; Dan, Asher, and Naphtali on the north. When they marched, Judah's group set out first, then Reuben's, then the tabernacle and the Levites in the middle, then Ephraim's and Dan's (Numbers 2:9, 16–17, 24, 31).

Picture it from above: a vast, orderly square, with God's dwelling at the very center of it all. Israel was a remarkably well-organized army. But more than that, it was a people arranged around the presence of God. Every tribe faced the tabernacle. Every family knew its place. When the camp moved, God moved in the middle of them. Paul would later remind a chaotic church that "God is not a God of disorder but of peace" (1 Corinthians

14:33). The order of the camp reflected the character of the God who dwelt within it.

There was also a practical wisdom in the arrangement. Israel needed protection on two fronts. The armies of the tribes, lined up on every side, stood ready to meet any attack from outside. The Levites, camped within, protected the people from the danger of approaching God's holiness carelessly. External enemies and internal irreverence were both real threats, and God provided for both.

Several details in these lists should not be missed. First, notice that Joseph does not appear as a tribe. Instead, his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh are each counted as full tribes, with their own leaders and their own positions in the camp (Numbers 1:10, 32–35; 2:18–21). This gave Joseph a double portion, which was traditionally the privilege of the firstborn. Jacob had announced it on his deathbed: "Now then, your two sons born to you in Egypt before I came to you here will be reckoned as mine; Ephraim and Manasseh will be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are mine" (Genesis 48:5). Why did Joseph receive the firstborn's honor rather than Reuben, who was actually Jacob's firstborn? Chronicles explains: Reuben "was the firstborn, but when he defiled his father's marriage bed, his rights as firstborn were given to the sons of Joseph" (1 Chronicles 5:1). Joseph, who had preserved the whole family through the famine, received the double portion.

Second, notice that even though Reuben was the firstborn and Joseph received the firstborn's inheritance, it was Judah who led the camp. "On the east, toward the sunrise, the divisions of the camp of Judah are to encamp under their standard.... They will set out first" (Numbers 2:3, 9). Judah's tribe was the largest,

with 74,600 fighting men (Numbers 1:27), and Chronicles notes that "Judah was the strongest of his brothers and a ruler came from him" (1 Chronicles 5:2). Unlike his three older brothers, Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, Judah had no comparable mark against him in Jacob's final blessing. Instead Jacob had said, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his" (Genesis 49:10). Royal authority would come from this tribe. David would come from Judah, and so would the Messiah, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). Already, in the arrangement of the wilderness camp, Judah marched in front, facing the sunrise.

Third, notice how the privileges that normally belonged to one firstborn son were divided among three brothers. The double portion of land went to Joseph. The royal line went to Judah. The priesthood went to Levi. Reuben, the actual firstborn, received none of them. And that division had a lasting consequence: no single tribe held land, throne, and altar together. Kingship and priesthood were separated from the start. That is why, when King Uzziah later entered the temple to burn incense, the priests confronted him and the Lord struck him with leprosy (2 Chronicles 26:16–21). A king from Judah had no right to the priest's duties.

The New Testament makes something wonderful of this separation. Hebrews points out that "our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests" (Hebrews 7:14). Jesus could not be a priest after the order of Aaron. And so Hebrews argues that He holds a priesthood of a different and greater order, the order of Melchizedek, who was both king and priest. The separation that

Numbers establishes is precisely what makes that argument necessary, and what makes its conclusion so glorious. In Jesus, for the first time, the throne of Judah and the priesthood are united in one Person. Zechariah foresaw it: "he will be a priest on his throne" (Zechariah 6:13).

Chapter 2 ends as chapter 1 did: "So the Israelites did everything the LORD commanded Moses; that is the way they encamped under their standards, and that is the way they set out, each of them with their clan and family" (Numbers 2:34). The camp was ready. The army was counted. God was in their midst. Everything was prepared for a swift march to the Promised Land.

We know how the story will unfold, and it will not be swift. But at the beginning of Numbers, it is worth pausing to see what God had done. He had multiplied Abraham's descendants as He promised. He had redeemed them from slavery. He had given them His Law and His presence. He had organized them, named them, and placed Himself at the center of their life. Everything they needed to enter the land was already theirs. What they lacked, as we will see, was faith.

The same is true for us. In Christ, God has given us "everything we need for a godly life" (2 Peter 1:3). He has placed Himself at the center of His people by His Spirit. He knows each of us by name. The question Numbers will press on us, chapter after chapter, is whether we will trust Him in the wilderness.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Moses says the journey from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea took eleven days, yet Israel wandered for forty years. As you

begin Numbers, what do you think might turn a short journey into a long one in your own spiritual life?

2. The census of Numbers 1 was commanded by God; David's census was condemned as sin. What is the difference? Where are you tempted to trust in numbers, resources, or strength rather than in God?
3. The census counted every man "by name, one by one." How does it encourage you that God knows you personally, not merely as part of a crowd?
4. The Levites camped around the tabernacle "so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelite community." How does this show God's mercy as well as His holiness?
5. Every tribe camped facing the tabernacle, with God at the center. What would it look like for God to be at the center of your household, your schedule, and your decisions?
6. Kingship came through Judah and priesthood through Levi, and the two were kept separate until Jesus united them. Why is it significant that Jesus is both our King and our Priest?

Chapter Two

Numbers 3–4

Chapters 3 and 4 of Numbers turn from the army of Israel to the tribe that would not fight, the Levites. They record who the Levites were, why God took them for Himself, how many there were, and exactly what each family was to do. Like much of the Law, these chapters can feel like a long procession of names, numbers, and assignments. But they contain some of the Bible's clearest pictures of redemption, and they raise questions about God's choices that are worth pondering.

Chapter 3 opens with a surprising heading: "This is the account of the family of Aaron and Moses at the time the LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai" (Numbers 3:1). What follows is a list of Aaron's sons: "Nadab the firstborn and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar" (Numbers 3:2). The text reminds us soberly that "Nadab and Abihu, however, died before the LORD when they made an offering with unauthorized fire before him in the Desert of Sinai. They had no sons, so Eleazar and Ithamar served as priests during the lifetime of their father Aaron" (Numbers 3:4).

But where are the sons of Moses? The heading names Moses, yet his family does not appear. Isn't that remarkable? In Jewish tradition, Moses is regarded as the greatest of the prophets, often ranked even above Abraham and David. Yet his children are barely mentioned in the entire Bible. We learn the names of his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, and very little else (Exodus 2:22; 18:3–4). Aaron's descendants, by contrast, are named again and again and play major roles in Israel's history. The same is true of the descendants of Abraham and of David.

We should be careful here, because we are moving somewhat into the realm of reflection rather than explicit teaching. But it seems that the point is not the descendants of great men as such. Such descendants sometimes turn out well and sometimes very badly. Josiah and Manasseh were both descendants of David; one was Judah's most faithful king and the other its worst. When Scripture traces a family line at length, it is because God chose that family and made promises concerning it. That was not the case with Moses.

What makes this so interesting is that God offered Moses exactly that kind of heritage, and Moses turned it down twice. After the golden calf, God said, "Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation" (Exodus 32:10). And later, at Kadesh, after the people refused to enter the land, God said, "I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they" (Numbers 14:12). Moses could have become a second Abraham, the father of a new people.

Why did Moses decline? In both cases he interceded for Israel, appealing to God's reputation among the nations and to His covenant faithfulness. Moses seems to have cared more about God's name than about his own. And on the first occasion he went even further. He told the people, "You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin" (Exodus 32:30). Then he prayed, "But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written" (Exodus 32:32).

Moses offered himself as a substitute for his people. But God did not accept the offer: "Whoever has sinned against me I will

blot out of my book" (Exodus 32:33). Moses was not qualified to bear the sins of others, because he had sins of his own. Yet his prayer is a beautiful prelude to the One who could make such an atonement, not only for Israel but for the whole world. The apostle Paul prayed something similar about his own people: "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people" (Romans 9:3). Neither Moses nor Paul could actually do it. But Christ did: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). Only the sinless Son of God, fully God and fully man, could accomplish what was impossible for anyone else.

Was Moses' refusal simply foolish? God could have started over with Moses as He had with Noah and then with Abraham. In one sense, perhaps He did, since the entire generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness, and only their children entered the land. But those children were not uniquely Moses' children. Moses gave up the chance to be the founder of a great nation, and his own descendants faded into obscurity.

From a worldly point of view, that looks like folly. But Paul writes, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18). What looked like foolishness in Moses was a reflection of the wisdom of God, the same wisdom that would one day be displayed on the cross. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Moses showed a measure of that love when he interceded for God's people. And we are called to love one another in the same way: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35).

Scripture gives us one further glimpse of Moses' family, and it is a sad one. In the dark days of the judges, when the tribe of Dan set up an idolatrous shrine in the north, the priest who served it is named as "Jonathan son of Gershom, the son of Moses" (Judges 18:30). Many ancient Hebrew manuscripts insert a small letter that changes "Moses" to "Manasseh," apparently because scribes were reluctant to record that Moses' own grandson had led Israel into idolatry. If "Moses" is the original reading, as many believe, it powerfully confirms that greatness is not passed on by lineage. Faith must be received anew in every generation.

After Aaron's family, the chapter turns to the Levites as a whole. "Bring the tribe of Levi and present them to Aaron the priest to assist him. They are to perform duties for him and for the whole community at the tent of meeting by doing the work of the tabernacle" (Numbers 3:6–7). Moses and Aaron were both Levites, brothers from the same family. To Aaron and his sons was given the priesthood itself, including the high priest's solemn duty of entering the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. The rest of the Levites were given to the priests as assistants, responsible for the care, transport, and guarding of the tabernacle: "Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him" (Numbers 3:9).

Why did God choose the Levites for this privilege? For that matter, why did He choose Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, and Aaron's family alone for the priesthood? These questions are worth sitting with rather than answering too quickly.

Levi's own record in Genesis was hardly distinguished. He and his brother Simeon deceived and slaughtered the men of Shechem to avenge their sister, and Jacob's deathbed words

cursed their anger: "I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7). That is exactly what happened to Levi. The tribe received no territory of its own, but was scattered among the other tribes in forty-eight towns. Yet the form the scattering took was priestly service. The curse was not simply reversed; it was redeemed and repurposed.

There was one moment when the Levites did show their loyalty. After the golden calf, Moses stood at the entrance to the camp and cried, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me." And "all the Levites rallied to him" (Exodus 32:26). Afterward Moses said to them, "You have been set apart to the LORD today" (Exodus 32:29). So there was a moment of costly faithfulness in the tribe's history. Still, whatever the reasons for God's choice, it was evidently not the tribe's overall merit. The same is true of the others. Moses argued with God at length before agreeing to go to Pharaoh. Aaron made the golden calf. God's choices display His grace, not the worthiness of those He chooses. As Paul would put it, God chose "the foolish things of the world to shame the wise... so that no one may boast before him" (1 Corinthians 1:27, 29).

Then God explains why the Levites belonged to Him in a special way. We noted this briefly at the very beginning of Leviticus, and here it is spelled out: "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD" (Numbers 3:12-13).

Readers of Exodus may have wondered what it meant for Israel to "give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb" (Exodus 13:12). Israel's firstborn sons did not go on to serve God in any special role. Now we see why. When the tenth plague struck Egypt, the firstborn of Israel were spared by the blood of the Passover lamb. From that night on, they belonged to God. But instead of taking every firstborn son from every family for His service, God took one tribe in their place. The Levites became substitutes for the firstborn of the whole nation. Every time an Israelite saw a Levite at work around the tabernacle, he was looking at a living reminder of the Passover night, when God spared his firstborn.

So Moses counted the Levites, every male a month old or more, and counted the firstborn of the other tribes the same way. The Levites numbered 22,000 (Numbers 3:39). The firstborn numbered 22,273 (Numbers 3:43). There were 273 more firstborn than there were Levites to take their place.

What happened to the 273? God did not say, "That's close enough." He did not round down to the nearest thousand or treat the difference as a margin of error. "To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites, collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. Give the money for the redemption of the additional Israelites to Aaron and his sons" (Numbers 3:46–48). Moses collected 1,365 shekels of silver, exactly 273 times five, and gave it to the priests (Numbers 3:50). Every single firstborn was accounted for. None was left unredeemed.

That precision points us to Christ. Our redemption was not an approximate transaction either. It was not enough for Jesus

to keep most of the Law, or to be better than everyone else. He lived a sinless life, perfect in every respect by God's own exacting standard, in order to redeem us. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). And the price was not five shekels a person. "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18–19). God's accounting is exact. No one who belongs to Christ is left unredeemed.

It is worth adding a note of honesty here. If we add up the totals given for the three Levitical clans in this chapter, 7,500 Gershonites, 8,600 Kohathites, and 6,200 Merarites, the sum is 22,300, not 22,000 (Numbers 3:22, 28, 34, 39). Interpreters have offered various explanations. Some suggest that a single letter was miscopied in one of the clan totals in the course of transmission; others suggest that 300 of the Levites were themselves firstborn and so could not stand in for anyone else. The text does not tell us. We mention it because careful reading means being precise both about what Scripture tells us and about what it does not. It is no more faithful to invent a confident explanation for an unresolved detail than to ignore a detail that is plainly there. Humility about uncertainty is part of reading carefully. Similarly, when Numbers 26:62 later gives the Levites as 23,000, that is not a contradiction; it is a census taken nearly forty years later.

God's precision in these chapters should shape how we handle His Word. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Jesus said, "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). If God cares so much about every detail, should we care any less when we study what He has said?

Careful handling of Scripture means attending to context, comparing Scripture with Scripture, distinguishing the covenants, and resisting the temptation to read our own experiences or preferences into the text. Some teachers make themselves appear learned by citing the Hebrew or Greek, or by quoting a commentator who agrees with them, while neglecting these basic disciplines. Hebrew, Greek, and commentaries are useful tools when they clarify the text, but their presence alone proves nothing. And we should notice that the verse just before 2 Timothy 2:15 warns against "quarreling about words" (2 Timothy 2:14). Correctly handling the word of truth is not a matter of winning arguments or displaying technical skill. It is a matter of faithfulness, and it should make us humbler, not prouder. The best test is to ask ourselves honestly whether we apply the same scrutiny to the teachers we favor as to the ones we doubt.

We are working through what may be some of the hardest sections of the Bible to read. It is worth plodding faithfully through them, because these passages too are the Word of God. But we should resist the temptation to make them more interesting by unearthing hidden meanings or fixating on individual words out of context. A believer who meditates on the whole counsel of Scripture will be far better equipped than one who spends months contemplating a single word or name in isolation. These chapters reward patient reading. Their lists

show a people ordered around God's presence, with distinct responsibilities and a shared dependence on redemption.

The rest of chapter 3 and all of chapter 4 describe the Levites' positions in the camp and their duties on the march. The three Levitical clans camped on three sides of the tabernacle, while "Moses and Aaron and his sons were to camp to the east of the tabernacle, toward the sunrise, in front of the tent of meeting" (Numbers 3:38), guarding the entrance.

When the camp moved, each clan had its own assignment. The Gershonites carried the curtains, coverings, and hangings of the tabernacle (Numbers 4:24–26). The Merarites carried the frames, crossbars, posts, and bases (Numbers 4:31–32). The Kohathites, the clan to which Moses and Aaron belonged, carried the most holy things: the ark, the table, the lampstand, the altars, and their utensils (Numbers 4:4–15).

But before the Kohathites could lift anything, Aaron and his sons had to enter the tabernacle and cover every holy object with cloths and leather coverings. Only then could the Kohathites come to carry them, and even so, "they must not touch the holy things or they will die" (Numbers 4:15). God added a special warning to protect them: "See that the Kohathite tribal clans are not destroyed from among the Levites. So that they may live and not die when they come near the most holy things, do this for them: Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry. But the Kohathites must not go in to look at the holy things, even for a moment, or they will die" (Numbers 4:18–20).

This was a privileged task and a dangerous one. The Kohathites carried the holiest objects in Israel on their shoulders, with poles, not on carts (Numbers 7:9). We saw in

Leviticus what happened centuries later when David ignored this instruction and put the ark on a cart, and Uzzah reached out to steady it. When David brought the ark up the second time, he did it properly: "the Levites carried the ark of God with the poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD" (1 Chronicles 15:15). The detailed instructions of Numbers 4 were not bureaucratic fussiness. They were God's mercy, making it possible for sinful people to carry His holy things without being destroyed.

Chapter 4 also specifies the age for this service: "Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work at the tent of meeting" (Numbers 4:3). Compare this with the military census of chapter 1, which counted every man twenty years or older, with no upper limit. Caleb, as we will see later, was still ready for battle at eighty-five (Joshua 14:10–11).

Why the difference? The text does not say. It is reasonable to suppose that service in the tabernacle required greater maturity from the start, and that the limit of fifty ensured that those who handled the holy things did so in the prime of their alertness and strength. Those are plausible reasons, but they are inferences rather than statements of Scripture. We should also note that Numbers 8 gives a slightly different starting age: "Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the tent of meeting" (Numbers 8:24). Interpreters have explained the difference in various ways, perhaps as a distinction between a period of training and full service, or between different kinds of duties. The text does not explicitly resolve it, and we should acknowledge that.

Numbers 8 also adds a lovely detail: at fifty, the Levites "must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They

may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work" (Numbers 8:25–26). Retirement from heavy labor did not mean being discarded. The older Levites still had a place alongside their brothers, sharing their experience and helping where they could. A change in assigned work did not mean a loss of belonging.

These chapters remind us that God's people are not organized around a single measure of usefulness. The soldier and the Levite had different callings, and Israel needed both. But the arrangement of the camp, with the tabernacle and the Levites at the center and the army surrounding them, shows what came first. It was more important for Israel to worship the Lord rightly than to have a strong army or a brilliant military strategy. That principle is timeless. It runs from the garden of Eden to the patriarchs, from Moses to David, from Christ and the apostles to us. Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Seeking God first does not make our other responsibilities unimportant. It puts them in order.

There are practical lessons for the church here, too. Wise arrangements for service, such as training, appropriate limits, rest, and the passing on of experience, are not a lack of faith. They are a form of reverence. A church should neither overload its willing servants nor set aside those whose roles change with age. The work of God and the people who do it are both gifts entrusted to us.

And these chapters point us once more to the heart of the gospel. The Levites stood in the place of the firstborn, and silver redeemed those who remained. But the greatest Firstborn of all,

God's own Son, was not spared. He was given, so that we who were under judgment might be redeemed and become part of "the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven" (Hebrews 12:23).

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Moses twice turned down God's offer to make him into a great nation, choosing instead to intercede for Israel. What does his choice teach you about caring for God's name and for others more than for your own legacy?
2. Moses' own grandson may have led Israel into idolatry. What does this teach you about the need for faith to be received anew in every generation? How are you passing on your faith?
3. God chose Levi, a tribe with a troubled past, for sacred service. How does God's choice of unlikely people encourage you about your own calling?
4. God required exact redemption for all 22,273 firstborn, leaving none unaccounted for. How does this precision help you appreciate the completeness of your redemption in Christ?
5. The Kohathites could carry the holy things only after the priests had covered them, and God's detailed instructions protected them from death. How do you see God's mercy in the "details" of His commands?
6. Older Levites retired from heavy work but continued to assist their brothers. How can your church honor and make

use of the wisdom and experience of those whose roles are changing with age?

Chapter Three

Numbers 5–6

The camp of Israel has been counted, arranged, and organized around the tabernacle. Now, before the march begins, God addresses the purity of the camp itself. Chapters 5 and 6 cover a surprising range of subjects: the removal of the unclean from the camp, restitution for wrongs, a strange ritual for a wife suspected of unfaithfulness, and the vow of the Nazirite. Then, at the end of chapter 6, comes one of the most beloved passages in all of Scripture, the blessing God gave Aaron to speak over His people. These chapters move from the uncomfortable to the beautiful, and all of them are shaped by one great fact: God was dwelling in the middle of the camp.

Chapter 5 begins, "Command the Israelites to send away from the camp anyone who has a defiling skin disease or a discharge of any kind, or who is ceremonially unclean because of a dead body. Send away male and female alike; send them outside the camp so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them" (Numbers 5:2–3). We studied these three kinds of uncleanness in Leviticus. What Numbers adds is the reason, stated plainly: the camp was the place "where I dwell among them." The holiness of God's presence required the purity of His people's camp.

Those three categories set up one of the most remarkable patterns in the Gospels. In quick succession, Matthew records Jesus touching a man with leprosy (Matthew 8:1–4), being touched by a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Matthew 9:20–22), and taking the hand of a dead girl (Matthew 9:23–25). Luke records the same encounters, and adds that

Jesus touched the funeral bier of a widow's son at Nain (Luke 7:14). Skin disease, a discharge, a dead body: the very three categories Numbers 5 excluded from the camp.

Any Jewish audience hearing those stories would have recoiled, expecting Jesus to become unclean through contact with all three. Instead, in each case, the unclean person became clean, and Jesus Himself was not defiled. That reversal is the point. In the Old Testament, only God can make the unclean clean. The Gospel writers seem to have gathered these particular encounters with real intention, expecting readers who knew the Law to recognize what they were seeing. The One who had commanded that the unclean be sent out of the camp had come into the world to touch them and make them whole. What might look like an arbitrary set of ancient prohibitions turns out to be essential background for understanding who Jesus is. It is a good reminder of how much we can miss if we neglect the whole counsel of Scripture.

The next paragraph returns to a subject we met in Leviticus: "Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD is guilty and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged" (Numbers 5:6–7). Notice that this law is not limited to accidental wrongs. It covers wronging another "in any way." And notice again that wronging a neighbor is described as being "unfaithful to the LORD."

This two-sided command, confession and restitution, holds together the vertical and horizontal dimensions of sin. The confession was directed primarily to the Lord. The restitution was directed to the person who had been wronged. A private

confession to God could not be used to make the injured neighbor irrelevant, and repaying the neighbor did not by itself settle the matter before God. Numbers adds a detail that Leviticus did not: "But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to the LORD and must be given to the priest" (Numbers 5:8). If the wronged person had died and left no next of kin, the debt did not simply disappear. The offender could not keep the benefit just because the ordinary recipient was gone.

David understood that every sin against a person is ultimately a sin against God. After his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, he prayed, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). His confession was directed to God, and it was God who forgave him. But we should read David's words alongside what he actually did to Bathsheba and Uriah. Saying that sin is ultimately against God does not make human harm secondary, and it certainly does not excuse neglecting it. Nathan's confrontation exposed exactly what the king had done, and the consequences in David's household were severe.

When we come to the New Testament, we do not find a detailed schedule of restitution like the one in Numbers. What we find instead is a strong emphasis on forgiveness. God forgives us when we confess: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And He expects us to forgive one another in the same way: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3:13).

That does not mean Christian forgiveness removes every practical duty of repair. When Zacchaeus met Jesus, he immediately promised to repay four times what he had taken (Luke 19:8), and Jesus taught that we should leave our gift at the altar and first go and be reconciled to a brother we have offended (Matthew 5:23–24). The absence of a detailed repayment schedule in the New Testament does not make it acceptable to keep what we have taken or ignore the harm we have caused.

How does forgiveness relate to confession? Christians have understood this in different ways. Our own conviction is that forgiveness between people, in its full sense, follows acknowledgment of the wrong. Jesus said, "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them" (Luke 17:3–4). Others emphasize that believers should release bitterness and the desire for revenge even when the other person never repents, and that is surely right as far as it goes. But whatever our view on that question, we can agree on this: when someone does confess, we must be ready and quick to forgive. In that way we reflect the far greater forgiveness the Lord has given us, as Jesus taught in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35). We should add that forgiveness does not always mean immediate restoration of trust, the removal of wise protective boundaries, or the cancellation of every remaining obligation. Forgiveness and wise accountability can coexist.

The rest of chapter 5 describes a ritual that many modern readers find troubling. If a husband suspected that his wife had

been unfaithful, "and this is hidden from her husband and her impurity is undetected (since there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act)" (Numbers 5:13), he could bring her to the priest. The priest would take "holy water in a clay jar and put some dust from the tabernacle floor into the water" (Numbers 5:17). He would have the woman swear an oath, write the curses of the oath on a scroll, and wash the ink off into the water, which she would then drink. If she was guilty, the curse would take effect in her body. "If, however, the woman has not made herself impure, but is clean, she will be cleared of guilt and will be able to have children" (Numbers 5:28).

On the face of it, this sounds like a double standard. There is no corresponding procedure for a wife who suspects her husband, and the chapter ends, "The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing, but the woman will bear the consequences of her sin" (Numbers 5:31). We should not pretend that the asymmetry is not there. But a few things are worth saying.

First, the standard of guilt for adultery was the same for men and women. "If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death" (Leviticus 20:10). The ritual of Numbers 5 applied only where there were no witnesses and the woman had not been caught, which meant that, without it, nothing could be proven either way.

Second, the ritual appears to have functioned as a protection for the wife as much as a test. Notice that the law explicitly anticipates the case in which the husband "is jealous and suspects her even though she is not impure" (Numbers 5:14). In a world where a jealous husband might accuse his wife endlessly, or take matters into his own hands, this procedure

removed the matter from his private suspicion and placed it before God, in public, with a defined outcome. An innocent wife would be publicly vindicated. The husband who brought a baseless accusation would bear the shame of it in front of the community. In other ancient cultures, a woman suspected of adultery might be thrown into a river, where survival depended on her ability to swim against the current. Here the ingredients were holy water, dust, and ink, none of them physically harmful. The only way the water could have any effect was if God Himself intervened. The outcome was placed entirely in His hands.

Third, and most importantly, Scripture is clear that every person, man or woman, is directly accountable to God. "So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (Romans 14:12). "For God does not show favoritism" (Romans 2:11). Christians disagree about roles in marriage and in the church, and those who hold different views on those questions are serious readers of Scripture. But no faithful reading of the Bible teaches that a woman's standing before God runs through her husband. There is "one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). Any reading of a passage like Numbers 5 that suggests otherwise, or that leaves a woman in danger in the name of submission, is a misreading.

This passage, then, is not comfortable, and we should not pretend it is. But it reveals a God who takes both faithfulness and false accusation seriously, who places hidden things before His own judgment, and who provides a way for the innocent to be cleared.

Chapter 6 turns from accusation to dedication, describing the vow of the Nazirite. The word comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to separate" or "to consecrate." "If a man or woman

wants to make a special vow, a vow of dedication to the LORD as a Nazirite..." (Numbers 6:2). The Nazirite vow allowed any Israelite, man or woman, to voluntarily set himself or herself apart for the Lord for a specified length of time. In a religious system where priesthood was hereditary and limited to men of one family, this was an open door. Anyone could choose a season of special devotion to God.

The vow involved three restrictions. The Nazirite had to abstain from wine and fermented drink, and indeed from anything that came from the grapevine, "not even the seeds or skins" (Numbers 6:3-4). No razor could touch the Nazirite's head: "They must be holy until the period of their dedication to the LORD is over; they must let their hair grow long" (Numbers 6:5). And the Nazirite could not go near a dead body, not even for the closest family members: "Even if their own father or mother or brother or sister dies, they must not make themselves ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of their dedication to God is on their head" (Numbers 6:7). In that last respect, the Nazirite was held to the same standard as the high priest (Leviticus 21:11).

The long hair was a visible sign of the vow. Everyone could see that this person had set himself apart. If the Nazirite was accidentally defiled by a death, he had to shave his head, offer sacrifices, and start the whole period of the vow over again (Numbers 6:9-12). When the time of the vow was complete, the Nazirite offered sacrifices at the tabernacle and then "must shave off the hair that symbolizes their dedication. They are to take the hair and put it in the fire that is under the sacrifice of the fellowship offering" (Numbers 6:18). The very sign of the vow was offered up to God.

The Bible's most famous Nazirite is Samson, who was a Nazirite not by his own choice but from birth. The angel of the Lord told his mother, "You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judges 13:5).

Yet Samson's life does not read like the life of someone holy and dedicated. He seems to have lived largely as he pleased, a fitting example of the era in which "everyone did as they saw fit" (Judges 21:25). He chose women from among the Philistines. He scooped honey out of the carcass of a lion he had killed (Judges 14:8-9), in plain contact with a dead body, and he killed thousands of men over the course of his life. Some Jewish commentators suggested that those who were Nazirites from birth were exempt from the rule about the dead, but Scripture does not say so. Samson treated his vow casually until, at the end, he revealed its secret to Delilah and lost the last sign of it: "But he did not know that the LORD had left him" (Judges 16:20). And yet, despite his obvious flaws, God still fulfilled His purpose through Samson's life, using him to begin delivering Israel from the Philistines. That is not a commendation of Samson. It is a testimony to God's sovereign grace working through deeply flawed people.

Others in Scripture share some features of the Nazirite vow. Hannah promised that if God gave her a son, "I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head" (1 Samuel 1:11). The word "Nazirite" is not used of Samuel, however, and he came from a Levite family. The angel told Zechariah that John the Baptist "is never to take wine

or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born" (Luke 1:15). But abstaining from wine is only one part of the vow, and Luke does not call him a Nazirite either. Only Samson is explicitly given the title. It seems that the formal Nazirite vow of Numbers 6 and a broader pattern of lifelong consecration marked by similar signs were related but not identical. In the New Testament, Paul appears to have taken a vow of this kind, cutting his hair at the end of it (Acts 18:18), and he later joined four men who were completing their vows at the temple (Acts 21:23–26).

The prophets regarded the Nazirites as a gift from God to Israel, and they condemned those who tried to corrupt them: "But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy" (Amos 2:12). There are always pressures on those who set themselves apart for God to give up their consecration and be like everyone else.

Christians are not bound by the Nazirite vow. But its spirit, the voluntary consecration of oneself to the Lord through self-denial and holiness, is something every believer is called to embrace. We may not grow our hair or give up grapes. But there may be seasons when we choose to set aside legitimate pleasures in order to devote ourselves more fully to prayer, to service, or to seeking God. And there may be lasting ways in which our lives are visibly different because we belong to Him. The question the Nazirite vow asks is simple: is there anything in your life that shows, visibly and costly, that you have been set apart for God?

Chapter 6 ends with a passage that stands in stark contrast to everything before it. After regulations about uncleanness,

restitution, suspicion, and vows, God gives Moses words for Aaron and his sons to speak over the people:

"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24–26).

This priestly blessing is one of the oldest and most beloved prayers in Scripture. It has been spoken over God's people for more than three thousand years. It is recited in synagogues and churches to this day. Archaeologists have even found it inscribed on two tiny silver scrolls, rolled up to be worn as amulets, dating to the time of Judah's kings. They are among the oldest surviving fragments of any biblical text.

Notice its structure. It has three lines, each beginning with "the LORD," each longer than the one before, as though the blessing grows as it is spoken. The first line asks God to bless and to keep, to provide for His people and to protect them. The second asks God to make His face shine on them and be gracious to them. The shining face is a picture of favor and delight, like the face of a father lighting up when he sees his child. The third asks God to turn His face toward them and give them peace, the Hebrew *shalom*, which means not only the absence of conflict but wholeness and well-being in every part of life.

The psalmists prayed this blessing back to God: "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us" (Psalm 67:1). "Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:3). They knew that everything depended on God's face turned toward them rather than away.

And then God explains what the blessing does: "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:27). The priests spoke the words, but God Himself did the

blessing. And the people who received it bore His name. They belonged to Him.

Christians have often noticed the threefold repetition of "the LORD" in this blessing and seen in it a hint of the Trinity, which Paul echoes in his own threefold benediction: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). Whether or not the original hearers could have understood it that way, we who know the full revelation of God can hear in these words the blessing of Father, Son, and Spirit.

And we know where the shining face of God is finally seen. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). The favor Israel prayed to receive is ours in Jesus. The peace Aaron pronounced is the peace Jesus gives: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you" (John 14:27).

It is fitting that the last act of Jesus on earth was an act of blessing. "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (Luke 24:50–51). Our great High Priest ascended with His hands raised over His people. He is still blessing us. He has put His name on us. The Lord bless you and keep you.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Numbers 5 sent the unclean outside the camp, but Jesus touched a leper, was touched by a bleeding woman, and took the hand of a dead girl, making each one clean. What does this reveal about who Jesus is?

2. Restitution in Numbers 5 went to the person who was wronged, and if no relative remained, to the Lord. Why is it important not to let confession to God replace making things right with others?
3. Jesus said, "if they repent, forgive them," even seven times in a day. How ready are you to forgive when someone acknowledges a wrong against you? What makes it difficult?
4. The ritual for a suspected wife placed the outcome entirely in God's hands and protected the innocent from false accusation. How does this passage show God's concern for both faithfulness and truth?
5. The Nazirite vow was a voluntary, visible, and costly act of consecration open to any Israelite, man or woman. Is there anything in your life that visibly shows you have been set apart for God?
6. Read the priestly blessing slowly (Numbers 6:24–26). Which of its six requests do you most need to receive today? Whom could you speak this blessing over this week?

Chapter Four

Numbers 7

Numbers 7 is the longest chapter in the five books of Moses, and at first glance it may seem the most repetitive. Twelve tribal leaders each bring an offering for the dedication of the altar, and each offering is described in full, word for word, twelve times over. Many readers are tempted to skim. But the repetition is deliberate, and if we slow down, this chapter has something to teach us about worship, about generosity, and about a God who notices every gift.

The chapter takes us back in time a little. "When Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings. He also anointed and consecrated the altar and all its utensils" (Numbers 7:1). The tabernacle was set up on the first day of the first month of the second year (Exodus 40:17), a month before the census of Numbers 1. Numbers is not always arranged in strict chronological order. Here the account of the offerings is placed after the organization of the camp and the assignment of the Levites' duties, because the first gift the leaders brought was designed to help the Levites do exactly the work we have just read about.

That first gift was practical: "They brought as their gifts before the LORD six covered carts and twelve oxen—an ox from each leader and a cart from every two" (Numbers 7:3). God told Moses to accept them and "Give them to the Levites as each man's work requires" (Numbers 7:5). The Gershonites, who carried the curtains and coverings, received two carts and four oxen. The Merarites, who carried the heavy frames, posts, and bases, received four carts and eight oxen. "But Moses did not

give any to the Kohathites, because they were to carry on their shoulders the holy things, for which they were responsible" (Numbers 7:9). Even the distribution of the carts reflected God's instructions about holiness. The heavy structural pieces could ride in carts; the ark, the lampstand, and the altars had to be carried by hand. We have already seen what happened when, centuries later, David forgot this and put the ark on a cart.

Then came the dedication offerings, one tribe each day for twelve days: "For the LORD had said to Moses, 'Each day one leader is to bring his offering for the dedication of the altar'" (Numbers 7:11). The first to come was from Judah: "The one who brought his offering on the first day was Nahshon son of Amminadab of the tribe of Judah. His offering was one silver plate weighing a hundred and thirty shekels and one silver sprinkling bowl weighing seventy shekels, both according to the sanctuary shekel, each filled with the finest flour mixed with olive oil as a grain offering; one gold dish weighing ten shekels, filled with incense; one young bull, one ram and one male lamb a year old for a burnt offering; one male goat for a sin offering; and two oxen, five rams, five male goats and five male lambs a year old to be sacrificed as a fellowship offering" (Numbers 7:12–17).

The order of the tribes follows exactly the order of the camp in chapter 2: Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun from the east; then Reuben, Simeon, and Gad from the south; then Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin from the west; and finally Dan, Asher, and Naphtali from the north. Once again, Judah leads.

The name of Judah's leader deserves a second look. Nahshon son of Amminadab appears in the genealogy of Jesus: "Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon,

Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David" (Matthew 1:4–6). The man who led Israel's first offering at the altar was an ancestor of David, and of the Messiah. And there is more. Nahshon's sister Elisheba married Aaron (Exodus 6:23). The royal line of Judah and the priestly line of Levi, which as we have seen were kept carefully distinct, touched in this one family. It is a small detail, but a fitting one, in light of the King who would one day also be our High Priest.

Another leader in the list is worth noticing. Elishama son of Ammihud, who brought the offering for Ephraim on the seventh day (Numbers 7:48), was, according to the genealogy of Ephraim, the grandfather of Joshua (1 Chronicles 7:26–27). The men who knelt before the altar in this chapter were the fathers and grandfathers of the generation who would one day conquer the land.

After Nahshon came Nethanel of Issachar, then Eliab of Zebulun, and so on, each bringing exactly the same offering, each described in exactly the same words. The chapter concludes with the totals: twelve silver plates, twelve silver bowls, twelve gold dishes, and hundreds of animals (Numbers 7:84–88).

Why does Moses repeat every offering in full? Why not simply write "and the other eleven leaders brought the same"? We cannot be certain, but it seems to highlight the individual obedience of each tribal leader. Israel was God's people as a whole, but God took note of each tribe, and each leader, separately. The offering of Naphtali on the twelfth day was recorded in the same detail as the offering of Judah on the first. The last was not less important than the first. No tribe's worship

was lost in the crowd or summarized away. The community's worship did not belong only to its most prominent members.

That is a comfort to us. Our gifts to God, our acts of service, our worship offered in obscurity, are not lumped together or forgotten. "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people" (Hebrews 6:10). Malachi tells us that when those who feared the Lord talked with one another, "a scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name" (Malachi 3:16). God keeps records, and He keeps them in detail.

But the identical offerings raise another question. Nothing in the text says God prescribed this particular offering. It seems that Nahshon, the first to come, simply set the standard, and everyone else followed it: no more, no less. Reading through the chapter, one almost hopes that someone will break the pattern, bringing two silver plates instead of one, or six goats instead of five. No one does.

There is nothing wrong with uniform obedience. The tribal leaders gave generously and together, and there is something beautiful in their unity. But their example invites us to ask a question about ourselves. Do we simply do what is required of us? Do we offer only what is expected? Is our devotion to God a ceiling or merely a floor?

Scripture shows us the other pattern too. When David prepared for the building of the temple, he did not merely match a standard. He gave extravagantly from his own treasures, beyond anything required, and then invited Israel's leaders to give willingly as well. "The people rejoiced at the willing response of their leaders, for they had given freely and

wholeheartedly to the LORD" (1 Chronicles 29:9). And David's prayer reveals the heart behind it: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14). Paul describes the churches of Macedonia the same way: "they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:3). And Jesus commended a poor widow who put two small coins into the temple treasury, because she gave "everything—all she had to live on" (Mark 12:44).

The identical offerings of Numbers 7 also prompt a warning. It is possible to give in a ritual, unreflective way, going through the motions without thinking about why. One might think of the way some Christians approach giving at church: calculate a percentage of income, put it in the offering plate, and never consider what it means or whom it serves. We have noted our conviction that the tithe belongs to the Mosaic covenant rather than binding Christians as law. But whatever one's view of the tithe, the danger is the same. Giving that begins and ends with a calculation can easily become a habit without a heart.

That raises related questions that thoughtful believers have asked. How should churches today be supported? Has the way churches are structured drifted from the patterns of the New Testament, perhaps shaped at times by institutional self-interest? Paul's own example is instructive, because he argues both sides in the same passage. He establishes at length that "the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). Then he explains that he personally declined that right, "so that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge" (1 Corinthians

9:18). Christians have answered these questions in different ways, from churches with full-time paid pastors and substantial structures to house churches led by bivocational elders who follow Paul's tentmaking model. That Paul treated support as a right he could waive, rather than a rule in either direction, may be the most useful guidance we have. What matters most is that the gospel is not hindered and that giving flows from willing hearts.

Some readers wonder where Israel got all this grain and oil in the wilderness, since they had complained of having nothing to eat. The gold and silver presumably came from the plunder of Egypt. As for the grain and oil, Scripture does not say. Israel left Egypt with "large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds" (Exodus 12:38), which explains the animals. Perhaps they traded for grain and oil with the peoples and caravans of the region, using the wealth they had brought out of Egypt, as nomadic peoples in the ancient world often did. We simply are not told.

Another question is why the sin offering was the smallest part of each gift, a single male goat, when there were twenty-one animals in all. The answer seems to lie in the nature of the occasion. This was a dedication, not a day of atonement. The sin offering was present, because every approach to God required dealing with sin, but it was not the center of attention. The bulk of each leader's gift, seventeen of the twenty-one animals, was for the fellowship offering, which was eaten in a joyful meal. The proportions reflect a celebration.

What did the four kinds of offering represent? Numbers 7 does not say, but the regulations in Leviticus help us. We can

suggest the main themes, though we should hold some of these connections more firmly than others.

The grain offering, fine flour mixed with oil, came from the produce of the land and the labor of human hands. It is fitting to see it as an expression of thanksgiving for God's provision, the provision He had given since creation, when He gave humanity "every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth" for food (Genesis 1:29), and the provision He would give in the land He was bringing them into, a land with "houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide" (Deuteronomy 6:11). Leviticus does not explicitly make those connections, but they fit the offering well.

The burnt offering was, as we saw in Leviticus, associated with atonement: "it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you" (Leviticus 1:4). Because it was entirely consumed, it also expressed total dedication to God. It had a long history even before the Law. Noah offered burnt offerings after the flood (Genesis 8:20), and God asked Abraham for one on Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:2). Some have connected it especially with the sinful nature we inherited from Adam (Romans 5:12), distinct from particular sins; that is a thoughtful suggestion, though Leviticus does not draw the line so precisely.

The sin offering, as we saw, dealt especially with sins committed unintentionally or in ignorance, the kind of sins David had in mind when he prayed, "But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults" (Psalm 19:12). We should remember, though, that the sacrificial system as a whole also made provision for some acknowledged, deliberate wrongs when restitution was made, as we saw in Leviticus 6.

And the fellowship offering, whose name is related to the Hebrew *shalom*, was not primarily about atonement but about communion. Its fat was burned on the altar as "an aroma pleasing to the LORD," its breast and right thigh went to the priests, and the rest was eaten by the worshiper and his family. Everyone shared in it. It was a meal of peace, celebrating a restored relationship with God and with one another.

So taken together, these offerings portray a people approaching God through His provision: acknowledging their dependence on Him, receiving atonement for their sin and their sins, and sharing in fellowship at His table. Christians see all of these themes fulfilled in Christ, without needing to find a hidden meaning in every silver bowl.

The altar at the center of this chapter was a place of death. Every one of these twelve days, animals died on it. It is worth remembering that when we speak of "coming to the altar" in Christian worship. In some churches, the altar has become little more than a place to bring our requests and air our frustrations. Scripture certainly invites us to bring our requests to God: "in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (Philippians 4:6). But the altar was never meant to be only a request booth. It was a place where something died. When we come before God in worship, something in us should die: whatever displeases Him, whatever pride or self-will we have been clinging to. And when we leave, we should be changed. If you have truly encountered God, you will not leave the same.

The principles of God's kingdom seem backwards to the natural mind. To receive, you must give. To lead, you must serve. To find life, you must first die to self. Jesus put it plainly: "For

whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25). That "backwards" logic was not invented in the New Testament. It was built into the altar from the beginning.

The chapter ends with a single verse that is easy to pass over after eighty-eight verses of offerings, but it may be the most important verse of all: "When Moses entered the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from between the two cherubim above the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant law. In this way the LORD spoke to him" (Numbers 7:89).

This is exactly what God had promised: "There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites" (Exodus 25:22). The offerings had been brought. The altar had been dedicated. And God spoke. The point of the tabernacle, the point of all the offerings, was not the silver and gold. It was that God would meet with His people and speak to them.

Some have argued that even Moses could never enter the Most Holy Place, pointing to the verse that says, "Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:35). But that verse describes a particular occasion, when God's glory first filled the tabernacle, not a permanent rule. It is likely that no one could have entered at that moment. We find something similar in Revelation, where "the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed" (Revelation 15:8). When the glory was not

filling the tabernacle in that overwhelming way, it appears that Moses did go in to speak with the Lord, as Numbers 7:89 describes and as Exodus 25:22 promised.

Moses' access to God was unique. While the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place only once a year, and always with blood for his own sins, Moses seems to have been able to meet with the Lord whenever he needed to. God Himself later distinguished Moses from every other prophet: "With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles" (Numbers 12:8). "The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11).

What Moses had as a unique privilege, every believer now has through Christ. We do not need to wait for the Day of Atonement, and we do not need to be a Moses. Because our great High Priest has entered heaven itself on our behalf, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). The God who spoke to Moses from above the atonement cover has spoken to us finally and fully in His Son (Hebrews 1:1–2). The offerings of Numbers 7 were brought so that God could meet with His people. The one offering of Christ has opened that meeting place to us all.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Each of the twelve tribes' offerings is recorded in full detail, even though they were identical. What does this tell you about how God regards your own acts of worship and service, even those no one else notices?
2. Every leader brought exactly the same offering, and no one gave more. Is your devotion to God more like a floor or a

ceiling? What would it look like for you to give "freely and wholeheartedly," as David and the Macedonians did?

3. How can you guard against giving to God in a habitual, unreflective way? What questions could you ask yourself the next time you give?
4. Paul defended the right of ministers to be supported, yet chose not to use that right himself. What principles should guide how churches support those who serve them?
5. The altar was a place where something died. When you come before God in worship, is there anything in you that needs to die? How would you know if you had left His presence changed?
6. After all the offerings, God spoke to Moses from above the atonement cover. How often do you come to God expecting Him to speak to you through His Word? What difference does Hebrews 4:16 make in the way you approach Him?

Chapter Five

Numbers 8–10

These three chapters complete Israel's preparations at Sinai. The Levites are consecrated for their work. The people celebrate the Passover in the wilderness. The cloud of God's presence settles over the tabernacle to guide them. Silver trumpets are made to call them together. And then, at last, on the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifts and Israel sets out for the Promised Land. It is a moment full of hope. Everything is ready. God is leading. What could go wrong?

Chapter 8 begins with a brief instruction about the lampstand in the Holy Place: "When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand" (Numbers 8:2). Then it turns to the Levites. We saw in chapters 3 and 4 that God had taken the Levites for Himself in place of Israel's firstborn and assigned them their duties. Now they were formally set apart for that service.

The Levites were cleansed. Water of cleansing was sprinkled on them, they shaved their whole bodies, and they washed their clothes. Then came a remarkable ceremony. "You are to bring the Levites before the LORD, and the Israelites are to lay their hands on them. Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the LORD" (Numbers 8:10–11). The whole community, through its representatives, laid hands on the Levites, just as a worshiper laid his hand on an animal he offered. The Levites themselves were Israel's offering to God, a living sacrifice presented on behalf of the nation. Then the

Levites laid their hands on two bulls, one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering, to make atonement for themselves.

God explains why this mattered: "From among all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the tent of meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary" (Numbers 8:19). Here we get a clear insight into the purpose of the whole system of priests and Levites. The sacrifices, the cleansings, and the careful service were all there to make atonement for Israel so that they could live near God as He journeyed with them. Otherwise, God's holiness might destroy them because of their uncleanness and sin. Israel's problem was not merely finding the right route through the desert. It was how a holy God could dwell among a sinful people without consuming them. The Levites were God's protective provision for His people. Grace and holiness belong together: God graciously made a way for His people to live near Him, rather than asking them to invent their own.

The chapter closes with the regulations about the Levites' age of service that we considered earlier, including the gracious provision for older Levites to continue assisting their brothers after they retired from heavy work (Numbers 8:23–26).

Chapter 9 records Israel's second Passover, celebrated in the Desert of Sinai one year after the first one in Egypt. It is the only Passover recorded during the forty years in the wilderness. But this Passover raised a problem. Some men had become ceremonially unclean because they had handled a dead body, and so they could not take part. They came to Moses and asked, "We have become unclean because of a dead body, but why

should we be kept from presenting the LORD's offering with the other Israelites at the appointed time?" (Numbers 9:7).

Their question shows a real hunger to worship. They did not want to be excluded. And Moses' answer is a model of humility: "Wait until I find out what the LORD commands concerning you" (Numbers 9:8). Even Moses did not presume to make up an answer. He took the question to God.

God's answer was gracious. "When any of you or your descendants are unclean because of a dead body or are away on a journey, they are still to celebrate the LORD's Passover, but they are to celebrate it on the fourteenth day of the second month at twilight" (Numbers 9:10–11). Those who had a legitimate reason for missing the Passover would have a second chance, one month later. God made room for those who wanted to come but could not.

Centuries later, King Hezekiah made use of this very provision. When he restored the worship of the Lord in Judah after years of neglect, there was not time for enough priests to consecrate themselves before the Passover, so the nation celebrated it in the second month instead (2 Chronicles 30:2–3). Many of the people who came from the northern tribes had not purified themselves properly. But Hezekiah prayed for them: "May the LORD, who is good, pardon everyone who sets their heart on seeking God—the LORD, the God of their ancestors—even if they are not clean according to the rules of the sanctuary." And "the LORD heard Hezekiah and healed the people" (2 Chronicles 30:18–20). God cares about the heart of the one who seeks Him.

But the same passage has a sober warning. "But if anyone who is ceremonially clean and not on a journey fails to celebrate

the Passover, they must be cut off from their people for not presenting the LORD's offering at the appointed time. They will bear the consequences of their sin" (Numbers 9:13). Grace for those who could not come did not mean indifference toward those who would not. To neglect the Passover was to despise the very deliverance it commemorated.

"They will bear the consequences of their sin." Reading those words, a believer may well be moved to tears. By the Law's own logic, each person answers for his own failure. And yet the Lord, who knew us before the foundation of the world, planned to rescue us through the death of His Son, so that we would not bear the consequences of our sins. Christ bore them for us on the cross. "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:4-6).

That is what makes the gospel so remarkable. The Law's insistence that each person must bear his own sin makes substitution costly and necessary. It is not a loophole that quietly bypasses justice. It is justice fully satisfied by Someone willing to bear what the Law rightly demanded. The more we read, the more we see how completely undeserving we are of such mercy. May the Lord Jesus Christ be blessed today and forever!

The chapter also adds that a foreigner living among Israel who wished to celebrate the Passover could do so: "You must

have the same regulations for both the foreigner and the native-born" (Numbers 9:14). Even at Sinai, the door was open to outsiders who wanted to join themselves to the Lord.

The second half of chapter 9 describes the cloud of God's presence. "On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire" (Numbers 9:15). By day it was a cloud; by night it glowed like fire. And it did not merely sit there. It directed every movement of the camp.

"Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped" (Numbers 9:17). The passage goes on with almost dramatic repetition: sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening until morning; sometimes a few days; sometimes much longer. "Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out. At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out. They obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses" (Numbers 9:22-23). Israel's entire itinerary was dictated by watching a cloud.

What an amazing image. God's visible presence hovered over the center of the camp, day and night. It must have been an enormous comfort to know that God was present to protect and guide them. Christians who read this passage may feel a kind of longing. How wonderful it would be to see God's guidance so plainly! The disciples who walked with Jesus experienced something like it, with God in human form walking among them. Many of us wish we could have sat at Jesus' feet and heard the truth directly from His lips. One day we will.

The children's game "Simon Says" offers a helpful comparison. In the game, the leader gives commands, but players are to obey only when the command begins with "Simon says." Sometimes a player holds the same position for a long time, sometimes only briefly, but he changes only when he hears those words. In the same way, Israel moved only when the cloud lifted. Sometimes they stayed in one place a short time, sometimes a long time, but they moved only at God's command. The object of the game is to listen carefully and always be ready to do what Simon says. Could this have been part of God's purpose in guiding Israel by the cloud, that they would always be listening and always be ready to obey?

The comparison also has its limits, and they are instructive. God was not trying to trick Israel into failure, as the leader in the game does. The cloud signified the presence of the One who had rescued them. And the cloud taught obedience through time as well as through movement. Israel could not decide that an unusually long stay meant God had forgotten them, or that a brief stay justified ignoring the signal to move on. Their responsibility was the same in both cases: to follow the Lord's direction. Faithfulness was measured by responsiveness, not by how many miles they could report.

Nor was waiting simply inactivity. While the cloud rested, the camp still had families to feed, disputes to settle, worship to maintain, and neighbors to serve. Remaining where God had placed them required steady obedience in ordinary responsibilities. That is a word for many believers. We may be in a season when we cannot change a difficult circumstance, and we long for the cloud to lift. But there is considerable faithfulness to be practiced right where we are. Sometimes our

eagerness for a new assignment distracts us from the present one.

We should also be careful about how we apply this passage to guidance today. We have no visible cloud. And we have no promise that every change of feeling, unexpected opportunity, or inconvenient delay is an infallible signal from God. God guides His people now through the clear commands of Scripture, through prayer, through wise counsel, and through responsible judgment shaped by His Word. That is a more faithful framework than treating every impression as though it were the cloud lifting from the tabernacle.

Peter gives us a different kind of readiness: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience" (1 Peter 3:15–16). Israel had to be ready to move when God moved. We are to be ready to speak when God gives us opportunity. Are we always ready to testify that Jesus is our Lord? And is our manner of life such that our answer will be believed? Peter was writing to believers who might suffer for doing right. Readiness for Christ includes gentleness, respect, and a clear conscience, not merely having the right words available.

The cloud and fire that settled on the tabernacle are often called by a later Jewish term, the *Shekinah*, meaning God's dwelling presence. Its story runs through the rest of the Old Testament, and it is a story worth tracing.

When the tabernacle was first completed, the glory of the Lord filled it so completely that Moses could not enter (Exodus 40:34–35). That glory led Israel through the wilderness and into

Canaan. But in the days of Eli, when the Philistines captured the ark, Eli's daughter-in-law named her newborn son Ichabod, saying, "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured" (1 Samuel 4:22).

Yet the glory returned. When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem, "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it" (2 Chronicles 7:1-2).

Tragically, Israel failed again and again to follow God's instructions, and the prophet Ezekiel saw in a vision what their sin would lead to: "Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple" (Ezekiel 10:18). The glory left the temple, and then the city, before Jerusalem fell to Babylon.

When the exiles returned and began rebuilding the temple, "many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy" (Ezra 3:12). The older generation's grief was partly about the second temple's smaller scale and lesser splendor. But there was something even more troubling. When the tabernacle was completed, God's glory filled it. When Solomon's temple was completed, God's glory filled it. When the second temple was completed, Scripture records no such thing. The glory that departed at the exile did not return in the same way.

But God had made a promise through the prophet Haggai about that very building: "'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace'" (Haggai 2:9). How could a smaller, plainer temple ever have greater glory

than Solomon's? Malachi gave the answer: "Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple" (Malachi 3:1).

With the birth of Jesus, the glory of God came down again, this time in human form. "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). As we noted earlier, the word translated "made his dwelling" is related to the word for a tent or tabernacle. Just as the cloud by day and fire by night had once shown God's presence in the middle of the camp, God came to dwell among His people in the body of Jesus Christ. And He came into that very second temple. Simeon took Him in his arms there as an infant (Luke 2:27–32). The glory of the latter house was indeed greater than the glory of the former.

Tragically, many did not recognize Him. "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:10–11). God's glory had returned to Israel in a form no one expected, not filling a building but filling a Person. Isaiah had foreseen this blindness when God sent him to a people who would be "ever hearing, but never understanding; ever seeing, but never perceiving" (Isaiah 6:9). Thank You, Lord, that You are the One who opens eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand, so that we may turn from our sins and be healed through the Word who came to dwell among us.

And the story does not end there. The whole Bible is moving toward a day when "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation

21:3). The longing to sit at Jesus' feet and hear His voice is not wishful thinking. It is the destination of the whole story.

Chapter 10 begins with another provision for the journey: "Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out" (Numbers 10:2). Different trumpet signals would gather the leaders, gather the whole assembly, or set the camps in motion. And the trumpets had another purpose too: "When you go into battle in your own land against an enemy who is oppressing you, sound a blast on the trumpets. Then you will be remembered by the LORD your God and rescued from your enemies" (Numbers 10:9). They were also sounded at Israel's festivals as "a memorial for you before your God" (Numbers 10:10).

That promise is striking. In times of danger, Israel was to sound the alarm before the Lord, and He would remember them. Now, don't go out and buy trumpets! But consider some promises of the new covenant that are no less remarkable. "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10:12–13). We do not need trumpets. We need to call on the Lord.

"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31–32). Do you hear the logic? Since God has already given us the most precious thing He has, His own Son, what could possibly keep Him from giving us every other good thing along with Him?

But we should be careful here, as with the blessings of Leviticus 26. "All things" in Romans 8:32 is shaped by its context, and the context is not prosperity. The same chapter speaks of "trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword" (Romans 8:35), and it assumes that believers will face those things, not avoid them. Its promise is that none of them can separate us from the love of Christ. The fulfillment of God's blessings lies not so much in this life as in the life to come. That is why Paul speaks of "every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3), and why he writes, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Even the promise of Numbers 10:9 was not a simple guarantee that every battle would go Israel's way; their history includes defeats. What the verse promised was that they would be remembered. That is exactly what the new covenant promises us. God will never forget those who call on Him.

And then, at last, the moment came. "On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle of the covenant law" (Numbers 10:11). Israel had been camped at Sinai for nearly a year. Now "They set out, this first time, at the LORD's command through Moses" (Numbers 10:13). The tribes moved out in exactly the order God had given in chapter 2, Judah first, with the Levites carrying the tabernacle in the middle of the procession.

Just before they left, Moses made a surprising request of his brother-in-law Hobab, a Midianite who knew the desert well. "We are setting out for the place about which the LORD said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will treat you well, for the LORD has promised good things to Israel" (Numbers 10:29).

When Hobab declined, Moses pressed him: "Please do not leave us. You know where we should camp in the wilderness, and you can be our eyes" (Numbers 10:31). It is interesting that Moses, who had the cloud of God's presence to guide him, still wanted an experienced guide who knew the terrain. God's guidance did not make human wisdom unnecessary. Moses also extended an invitation, offering Hobab a share in the good things God had promised Israel. Hobab apparently accepted in the end, since his descendants, the Kenites, later lived among the people of Judah (Judges 1:16).

"So they set out from the mountain of the LORD and traveled for three days. The ark of the covenant of the LORD went before them during those three days to find them a place to rest" (Numbers 10:33). And the chapter ends with two short prayers that Moses prayed at every departure and every arrival: "Whenever the ark set out, Moses said, 'Rise up, LORD! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you.' Whenever it came to rest, he said, 'Return, LORD, to the countless thousands of Israel'" (Numbers 10:35–36). David would later begin one of his psalms with the same words (Psalm 68:1).

These are good prayers for us, too, at the beginning and end of every day, every task, and every season of life. When we set out: "Rise up, Lord. Go before us." When we come to rest: "Return, Lord. Stay with us." Israel set out from Sinai with everything they needed: God's Law, God's presence, God's guidance, and God's promises. As we will see in the next chapter, the journey would test whether they trusted the God who led them.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The Israelites laid their hands on the Levites, presenting them to God as a living offering. How does this picture help you understand Paul's call to offer yourself as "a living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1)?
2. The men who were unclean asked why they should be kept from the Passover, and God gave them a second chance. Yet those who simply neglected it were cut off. What is the difference between these two groups? Which describes your attitude toward worship?
3. Israel moved only when the cloud lifted, whether after two days or a year. Are you in a season of waiting? What faithful work can you do right where God has placed you?
4. God's glory filled the tabernacle and Solomon's temple, departed at the exile, and returned in Jesus, whom many did not recognize. What might keep people today from recognizing God's glory in Christ?
5. Israel was to sound the trumpets in battle and would be "remembered by the LORD." How does Romans 8:31–39 give you confidence when you call on God in difficulty, even when the outcome is not what you hoped?
6. Moses prayed, "Rise up, LORD!" whenever the ark set out, and "Return, LORD" whenever it came to rest. How could you build similar prayers into the beginning and end of your day?

Chapter Six

Numbers 11–13

For ten chapters, Numbers has been a book of preparation: counting, organizing, consecrating, and setting out. With chapter 11, it becomes a book of history, and the history is not a happy one. From here the book follows Israel from Sinai to Kadesh, and then across nearly forty years to the plains of Moab. If we catalog the major events of that journey, we find that sin and judgment make up the greater part of them. People died for complaining about hardship, about food and water, about the monotony of manna, and about powerful enemies. People died for challenging the leadership God had appointed, for breaking the Sabbath, and for immorality and idolatry. Three times God threatened to destroy the whole nation because of their complaining and unbelief.

Paul tells us why these stories were written down: "Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us.... So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Corinthians 10:5–6, 11–12). Notice whom Paul is warning. He was writing to Corinthians who were confident about their spiritual standing. They had the sacraments, knowledge, and spiritual gifts. Paul reminds them that Israel had the cloud, the sea, and miraculous food, and most of them still fell.

We should also remember that Numbers is not a complete diary of forty years. It is a selective account, organized around a

theme. Ordinary years passed without comment. What the book preserves is the pattern it wants us to remember: what happens when a rescued people will not trust the One who rescued them.

Chapter 11 opens with the first complaint: "Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the LORD, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the LORD burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (Numbers 11:1). The people cried out to Moses, Moses prayed, and the fire died down. They named the place Taberah, meaning "burning." Israel had been on the march for only three days.

Then came a second, more serious complaint. "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, 'If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!'" (Numbers 11:4–6).

Who was this "rabble"? When Israel left Egypt, "Many other people went up with them" (Exodus 12:38). We met one of them in Leviticus 24, the son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father. Others may have been Egyptians or people from other lands who joined Israel after witnessing the Lord's wonders. From the very beginning, God's people included people who were not physical descendants of Jacob but who joined themselves to Israel and its God, a pattern that would continue with Rahab, Ruth, and many others. The Law made room for them: "The same law applies both to the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you" (Exodus 12:49). Membership in God's people was a matter of covenant, not ancestry.

So the problem with the rabble was not their origin. It was their craving, and the way it spread. They complained first, and then the Israelites joined in with weeping. That is how discontent works. It spreads from person to person until a whole community is infected. "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). "Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). Even among God's people there can be those who draw others into sin, and we need to be on guard, while remembering that we ourselves are just as capable of being the ones who start the complaining. "But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

Look at what the people remembered. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost." At no cost? They had been slaves! The Egyptians "worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with harsh labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields" (Exodus 1:13–14). Pharaoh had ordered their baby boys thrown into the Nile. Yet all they seemed to remember was the food. Would anyone really choose to return to slavery for the sake of some cucumbers? Probably not. But we do love to complain, and when we complain, our memories become remarkably selective.

Aren't we all like that? Never satisfied, even when the Lord gives us everything we need. Many of us walk up to a full refrigerator and say, "There's nothing to eat." Our houses are not big enough. We do not have enough clothes. Our cars are too old. We forget the slavery God brought us out of and remember only the cucumbers.

This selective memory shows up especially in marriage. When we are upset with a spouse, every hurtful thing he or she

has ever said or done comes rushing back with remarkable clarity, while the vows we made to each other, and more importantly before God, are conveniently forgotten. Our love tends to be conditional. But God is not like us. He does not forget His promises. Scripture describes God again and again as remembering His covenant. Even when He compared Israel to an unfaithful wife through the prophet Hosea, He promised, "I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hosea 2:23). Paul calls husbands to love their wives "just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25), a love defined by sacrifice and faithfulness, not by whether the relationship feels rewarding at the moment. Love "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5). As we remember all that God has done for us, we should extend that same kind of love to those around us, beginning at home.

And yet, before we judge Israel too harshly, we should be honest. Would we not have complained? After a week of eating nothing but manna, with nothing to go with it, would we have been content and thanked God for His provision? Imagine eating the same food at every meal, day after day, month after month, with no end in sight. As far as the Israelites knew, manna was all they would ever get. They did not know that the Promised Land was only a few weeks' journey away. It is not right for us to condemn them smugly. We are made of the same stuff.

Still, the Lord was not angry merely because they were hungry for variety. God did not judge them for their discomfort. Verse 20 makes the real issue explicit: "because you have rejected the LORD, who is among you, and have wailed before

him, saying, 'Why did we ever leave Egypt?'" (Numbers 11:20). Their craving had become a rejection of God and a romanticizing of their former slavery. It is as though a believer were to say to the Lord, "Why did You even die for me? I would rather have my old life back." Nostalgia for our sinful past is not harmless. It is a quiet rejection of our Redeemer.

In the middle of this chapter, we find a second complaint, and it comes from Moses himself. "Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the LORD, 'Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors?... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin'" (Numbers 11:10–12, 14–15).

That is a raw and honest prayer. Moses was at his breaking point. And yet God did not rebuke him. Instead, He provided help: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders.... I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone" (Numbers 11:16–17).

Why was one complaint answered with help and the other with judgment? Both were honest. Both expressed real frustration. The difference was not in their intensity but in their direction. Moses brought his complaint to God, still trusting Him

even while overwhelmed. The people directed their complaint at their circumstances while wishing to undo the very deliverance God had given them. Moses still revered and loved his Lord even in his frustration. The people were interested only in themselves. The Psalms are full of honest complaints brought to God, and God welcomes them. What He opposes is the complaint that turns away from Him.

When the Spirit came on the seventy elders, they prophesied. Two men, Eldad and Medad, had stayed in the camp rather than going out to the tent, but the Spirit came on them too, and they prophesied in the camp. Joshua, zealous for Moses' honor, urged Moses to stop them. Moses' answer is one of the most generous things he ever said: "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). Moses had no desire to guard his position. And his wish was a prophecy of its own, fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when God poured out His Spirit on all His people (Acts 2:16–18).

Then God answered the people's demand for meat, and His answer was terrifying. "Now the LORD will give you meat, and you will eat it. You will not eat it for just one day, or two days, or five, ten or twenty days, but for a whole month—until it comes out of your nostrils and you loathe it" (Numbers 11:18–20).

Even Moses found this hard to believe. "Here I am among six hundred thousand men on foot, and you say, 'I will give them meat to eat for a whole month!' Would they have enough if flocks and herds were slaughtered for them? Would they have enough if all the fish in the sea were caught for them?" (Numbers 11:21–22). God's reply was a question: "Is the LORD's arm too short?

Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you" (Numbers 11:23).

Moses, who had seen the ten plagues, the parting of the sea, water from the rock, and bread from heaven, still questioned whether God could do what He said. God had demonstrated His power over and over. The Israelites had even composed a song to celebrate it (Exodus 15). Yet when a new need arose, Moses looked at his own resources and did the math. There is a lesson there for us. We sing on Sunday that nothing is too difficult for God. We lift our hands and confess our trust in Him, and some of us are moved to tears. And then, the very next moment, we are worrying, complaining, or immersed in matters that have little to do with what God has commanded. There is a disconnect between what we say we believe and what we actually believe.

How is that gap closed? Often, through testing. "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart" (Deuteronomy 8:2). Paul and James both teach that trials produce perseverance, character, and hope (Romans 5:3–4; James 1:2–4). It is through hardship that our faith is exercised and the gap between our words and our trust begins to close.

We need to say this carefully, though. When Hebrews tells us that Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8), it does not mean He moved from disobedience to obedience. He never sinned. It means that as the Son, He lived out obedience under the real conditions of human suffering, and so became our perfect High Priest. Our growth involves correction of sin as well as endurance; His involved faithful endurance without sin. And Romans 5 and James 1 invite us to

find hope within our trials, not to seek out pain as though misery were holy in itself. They do not give us permission to tell a suffering person that greater hardship is what they need. We can pray for relief, give practical help to those who suffer, and still trust God to produce endurance through what He allows. The real question is whether our confession of God's faithfulness shapes our next step of obedience.

We should also be careful not to turn God's question, "Is the LORD's arm too short?", into a promise that He will do whatever ambitious thing we propose. Moses had a specific word from God about the meat. Our confidence must rest on what God has actually promised, not on our own desires dressed up as faith.

God kept His word. A wind from the Lord drove quail in from the sea, and they fell around the camp in enormous numbers. The people spent two days and a night gathering them. And then comes one of the most sobering verses in the Bible: "But while the meat was still between their teeth and before it could be consumed, the anger of the LORD burned against the people, and he struck them with a severe plague. Therefore the place was named Kibroth Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had craved other food" (Numbers 11:33–34). The name means "graves of craving."

This passage is disturbing. God gave them meat, and then struck them before they could enjoy it. The psalmist summarized it: "So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease among them" (Psalm 106:15). Sometimes one of God's severest judgments is simply to give us exactly what we demanded.

What can we learn from this? We learn that God's provision is not always accompanied by His pleasure. If we do not receive

God's provision with faith and gratitude, we can be harmed by the very things He gives. The Israelites were not struck because they ate quail. They were struck because they were consumed by craving and did not trust or honor God. Scripture's answer to craving is not to suppress every desire, but to relocate it. Paul wrote, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Philippians 4:11–12).

With hindsight, we can see what Israel could not. If they had been just a little more patient, they would soon have been in a land flowing with milk and honey, with no shortage of variety. Now that we can see what they failed to see, we should be slower to complain about the troubles in our own lives, knowing that "our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17). When God blesses us, let us give thanks and not allow even the fulfillment of our desires to overshadow our worship of Him. When He brings hardship, let us be patient, remember His promises, and never slacken in our devotion. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it well: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

There is an ironic postscript to the manna story. In Jesus' day, some people demanded that He give them a sign to prove Himself: "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness" (John 6:31). They failed to remember that manna had not produced faith in the wilderness generation either. Jesus answered that He Himself is the true bread from heaven (John 6:32–35).

Chapter 12 brings a third complaint, and this time it comes from Moses' own family. "Miriam and Aaron began to talk

against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?' And the LORD heard this" (Numbers 12:1-2).

Some readers are surprised to realize that Miriam, Aaron, and Moses were siblings. Miriam was the older sister who watched over baby Moses in his basket among the reeds of the Nile, after their mother had placed him there (Exodus 2:1-4). She had led Israel's women in praise after the crossing of the sea. She was a prophetess and a leader in her own right; God later said through Micah, "I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam" (Micah 6:4). But now she and Aaron resented their younger brother. The complaint about his wife seems to have been a pretext. The real issue was their own position: "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?"

Then comes a remarkable sentence: "(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)" (Numbers 12:3). Tradition holds that Moses wrote Numbers, which would mean that the humblest man on earth wrote down that he was the humblest man on earth. Some interpreters believe this line was added by a later inspired editor, much as the account of Moses' death was added to Deuteronomy. Either way, the verse explains what happens next. Moses does not defend himself at all. He says nothing. If it were not for his humility, he could have used his position and power to strike back at his brother and sister. But humility kept him from being offended, and from the sin that easily follows offense. Someone has said that humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble" (James 4:6).

Moses did not defend himself, and so God defended him. He called all three siblings to the tent of meeting and said, "When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (Numbers 12:6–8). Hebrews later picks up that phrase: "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," but "Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house" (Hebrews 3:5–6).

"When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous—it became as white as snow" (Numbers 12:10). Aaron immediately pleaded with Moses: "Please, my lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed" (Numbers 12:11). And Moses, the one who had been wronged, cried out, "Please, God, heal her!" (Numbers 12:13). In a chapter full of complaint, the one person with the most right to complain chose instead to pray for the one who had wronged him.

God's reply has an almost tender severity: "If her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back" (Numbers 12:14). Miriam would be restored. Her disgrace was real, but it was limited. Forgiveness did not mean the sin was excused, but it did not mean she was banished forever either. And "the people did not move on till she was brought back" (Numbers 12:15). The whole nation waited for her. Even in her discipline, she was honored.

Why was Aaron not punished in the same way, since he took part equally? Scripture does not explain. Some have noticed that

Miriam's name comes first in verse 1, suggesting that she was the instigator. Others point out that Aaron was the high priest, and a skin disease would have disqualified him from his priestly duties, with consequences for the worship of the whole nation. Those are plausible explanations, but they remain guesses. Perhaps, in the end, we must say with Paul that God "has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy" (Romans 9:18).

Chapter 13 brings Israel to the edge of the Promised Land. "The LORD said to Moses, 'Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites'" (Numbers 13:1-2). Notice the words "which I am giving." The question of whether Israel would receive the land had already been settled by God. The spies were not sent to decide whether the land could be taken, but to see what God was giving them and to prepare for the task.

Twelve men were chosen, one leader from each tribe. Among them was Hoshea son of Nun, whom Moses renamed Joshua (Numbers 13:16), and Caleb son of Jephunneh from Judah. Moses gave them their instructions: "See what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. What kind of land do they live in? Is it good or bad? What kind of towns do they live in? Are they unwalled or fortified? How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor?... Do your best to bring back some of the fruit of the land" (Numbers 13:18-20). Their mission included both the goodness of the land and the strength of its defenses.

For forty days they explored. In the Valley of Eshkol they cut a single cluster of grapes so large that two men had to carry it on a pole between them (Numbers 13:23). Then they returned and gave their report. "We went into the land to which you sent

us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there" (Numbers 13:27–28).

Everything they said so far was true. Canaan really did have strong people and fortified cities. The spies did not invent the obstacles. Their failure was not in their observation but in their conclusion. "Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.' But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are'" (Numbers 13:30–31).

Caleb saw the same land they saw. Faith did not require him to pretend that the cities were undefended or that their inhabitants were weak. He simply interpreted what he saw in light of the God who had promised the land. The ten spies reversed that order. They interpreted God's promise in light of their fear. And their report grew worse as it went on: "We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:33).

That last sentence is revealing. "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes" was an honest description of their feelings. "And we looked the same to them" was a guess dressed up as fact. Their sense of smallness became a claim about how the enemy saw them. Discouragement had begun to speak with the authority of knowledge. We often do the same. We need to learn to distinguish between the facts of our situation and the fearful conclusions we attach to them.

The ten spies feared men more than they feared God. "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe" (Proverbs 29:25). This is the true test of faith: whether we trust God more than we fear the obstacles in front of us. Our faith is tested constantly, in serving, in giving, in speaking up, in waiting. We are called to walk by faith and not merely to talk about it. Generations later, a young shepherd named David would face a giant of his own. He did not see a nine-foot warrior as a reason for despair, because his eyes were fixed on the God who holds the universe in His hand: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty" (1 Samuel 17:45).

And Caleb's faith at the border of Canaan was not an isolated moment of courage. It was the opening scene of a story that would not be resolved for forty-five years. As an old man of eighty-five, Caleb would stand before Joshua and ask for the very hill country where the giants lived, saying, "I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out" (Joshua 14:11), because, as he said, "I, however, followed the LORD my God wholeheartedly" (Joshua 14:8).

Look back over these chapters, and in each case the complaint seems, by the world's standards, perfectly reasonable. Why would people not complain about the hardship of constantly breaking camp and moving on? Why would they not complain about eating the same food at every meal? Why could Miriam and Aaron not question their younger brother's authority, since they too had played important roles? And wouldn't we consider the ten spies wiser than Caleb for urging caution against a stronger enemy with fortified cities and giants?

By the world's wisdom, we would answer yes to every question. If we had been there, we would likely have been in the complaining crowd. But one thing changes everything: God. God was providing for them, so they needed to be thankful and content. God was guiding them, so they needed to respect the leaders He had chosen. God had promised them the land, so they needed to obey Him even when the obstacles seemed insurmountable. In each case God was testing whether they would find their satisfaction and confidence in Him alone. As we will see in the next chapter, the ten spies' report would lead to the most tragic decision in Israel's history.

These examples were written to shape our perspective and our faith. Let us not crave what the world enjoys in this life, forgetting the slavery from which we were rescued. Let us not be afraid to face the real obstacles to our faith, including the pull of fame, fortune, pleasure, and self-gratification. And let us remember, as Caleb did, that the Lord is our God, and keep our eyes on the end He has promised.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The Israelites remembered the fish and cucumbers of Egypt but forgot the slavery. What past sins or former ways of life are you tempted to remember with nostalgia? How does that nostalgia affect your relationship with God?
2. Moses and the people both complained, yet God helped Moses and judged the people. What made the difference? How can you bring your honest frustrations to God without turning away from Him?

3. "Is the LORD's arm too short?" Where is there a gap between what you say you believe about God on Sunday and how you live on Monday? How might God be using a present difficulty to close that gap?
4. God gave Israel the meat they craved, and it became a judgment. Have you ever received something you demanded from God and found it did not satisfy? What does it mean to be content "in any and every situation"?
5. Moses did not defend himself against Miriam and Aaron, and then prayed for Miriam's healing. How do you usually respond when your motives or position are challenged? What would humility look like in that situation?
6. The ten spies saw the same land as Caleb but reached the opposite conclusion. What "giants" are you facing right now? What is the difference between the facts of your situation and the fearful conclusions you may be attaching to them?

Chapter Seven

Numbers 14–15

Numbers 14 is the turning point of the book, and one of the saddest chapters in the Bible. The spies have returned. Ten of them have spread their fearful report. Now the whole nation must decide what to do. God had brought them out of Egypt with mighty signs and wonders to fulfill a promise He had made to Abraham more than four hundred years earlier. The land was right in front of them. And they refused it.

"That night all the members of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, 'If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?' And they said to each other, 'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt'" (Numbers 14:1–4).

The people wept aloud, as though they were facing certain death that very night. We can understand their fear. The descendants of Anak were apparently enormous, and the cities were fortified. Anyone might feel overwhelmed. But the Israelites had forgotten the whole story of their existence up to that moment. Their journey from Egypt to the edge of Canaan had been an unbroken series of signs and miracles: the plagues, the sea, the pillar of cloud and fire, the manna, the water from the rock, the victory over Amalek. It is as though the Lord were asking, "What more could I possibly do to win their hearts?" And once again they grumbled and rejected their Savior, this time

with open contempt. They even proposed choosing a new leader to take them back to slavery.

Two men stood against the tide. "Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, 'The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them'" (Numbers 14:6–9).

The phrase translated "we will devour them" is literally "they are our bread." The same image appears in the Psalms, where evildoers "devour my people as though eating bread" (Psalm 14:4). Some ancient Jewish paraphrases of the Old Testament explained Joshua's words this way: just as eating bread is effortless, so defeating these enemies would be effortless. We might say, "It'll be a piece of cake." That reveals the depth of Joshua's faith. He did not merely believe that Israel could win. He believed they could win easily. And his confidence rested not on Israel's strength but entirely on their God: "Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us."

The people's response was terrifying: "But the whole assembly talked about stoning them" (Numbers 14:10). Joshua and Caleb stood their ground for the Lord with the entire nation against them, knowing their lives were at risk. That is real courage.

The basic problem in Numbers 14 was not that Israel felt afraid. It was that they feared the wrong thing. They feared the

giants instead of fearing God. Jesus told His disciples, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). The one who truly fears God need not fear anything else. It takes what God called "a different spirit" to trust that the Lord is for us and not against us in difficult circumstances. "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

We face the same test in smaller ways every day. Should I share the good news with this person? Should I stand up for what is right in this situation? Like the Israelites, we know what the Lord can do, and yet we often let our fears dictate our actions. Hebrews names Israel's failure plainly: "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19). "The message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed" (Hebrews 4:2). And then, rather than treating it as ancient history, the writer urges his readers, "Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:11). Israel's danger was not that they did not know what God could do. They had seen it with their own eyes. Their danger was letting an accurate report of difficulty outweigh an accurate memory of God's power. That danger is always with us.

"Then the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the Israelites" (Numbers 14:10). And God spoke: "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs I have performed among them? I will strike them down with a plague

and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they" (Numbers 14:11–12).

We saw earlier that this was the second time God offered to make Moses the father of a new nation, and the second time Moses declined. Instead, he interceded. He appealed first to God's reputation among the nations. The Egyptians would hear of it, and the nations would say, "The LORD was not able to bring these people into the land he promised them on oath, so he slaughtered them in the wilderness" (Numbers 14:16). Then he appealed to God's own self-revelation, quoting what God had proclaimed to him on Mount Sinai: "The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Numbers 14:18; see Exodus 34:6–7). "In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now" (Numbers 14:19).

Moses did not appeal to Israel's goodness. There was none to appeal to. He appealed to God's glory and God's character. That is always the ground of intercession. When we pray for others, or for ourselves, our only plea is who God is.

And God answered: "I have forgiven them, as you asked. Nevertheless, as surely as I live and as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth, not one of those who saw my glory and the signs I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times—not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors" (Numbers 14:20–23).

Notice what stands side by side in those verses. God forgave them. He did not destroy the nation. And yet the consequence remained: the generation that refused the land would not enter

it. Forgiveness and consequence are not opposites. God may fully forgive a sin and still allow its earthly consequences to stand. That is a hard truth, but an important one.

Notice, too, the majestic oath in the middle of God's answer: "as surely as the glory of the LORD fills the whole earth." Even as He pronounced judgment on His rebellious people, God declared that His purposes for the whole world would not be thwarted. The prophet Habakkuk would echo it: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Habakkuk 2:14). Israel's unbelief could delay their entrance into the land, but it could not defeat God's plan.

Then God pronounced the sentence in detail. "In this wilderness your bodies will fall—every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me" (Numbers 14:29). The men counted in chapter 1, the proud army of more than six hundred thousand, would die in the desert. "As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected" (Numbers 14:31). There is a painful irony there. The people had used their children as an excuse for unbelief, and God said that those very children would inherit what their parents refused. "For forty years—one year for each of the forty days you explored the land—you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you" (Numbers 14:34). And the ten spies who had spread the bad report "were struck down and died of a plague before the LORD" (Numbers 14:37).

Only two of the men counted in the census were exempted. God said of one of them, "But because my servant Caleb has a

different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it" (Numbers 14:24). The same promise applied to Joshua (Numbers 14:30).

We later learn that Caleb was forty years old when he explored the land (Joshua 14:7). He had to wait forty-five more years before he received his inheritance. Think about that. Caleb was faithful, and yet he spent four decades wandering in the wilderness because of the unbelief of others. His faithfulness did not spare him from the consequences of his generation's sin. Caleb's story is not a promise that faithfulness always brings immediate reward. It is a promise that faithfulness will receive its due in God's time, even when that timeline is shaped by other people's failures. And God was faithful to Caleb. He not only kept him alive through the wilderness years but kept him as vigorous at eighty-five as he had been at forty. What a blessing!

When we read this chapter, it is easy to shake our heads at the Israelites. But which of us has not frustrated the Lord with our immaturity and unbelief? And yet He has remained patient and kind to us. God chose Israel as His people knowing in advance exactly what they would be like. Are we any different? We too were once among those of whom Scripture says "there is no one who seeks God... there is no one who does good" (Romans 3:11–12). Yet God chose us, called us, justified us, and will glorify us (Romans 8:30). His love for the undeserving is beyond comparison. That is the reason we should strive all the more to live lives worthy of His calling.

The saddest part of the chapter was still to come. When Moses reported God's sentence, "they mourned bitterly." And the next morning they had a new plan: "Early the next morning

they set out for the highest point in the hill country, saying, 'Now we are ready to go up to the land the LORD promised. Surely we have sinned!'" (Numbers 14:40).

It sounds like repentance. They confessed their sin. They were ready to obey. But Moses said, "Why are you disobeying the LORD's command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies" (Numbers 14:41–42). "Nevertheless, in their presumption they went up toward the highest point in the hill country, though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD's covenant moved from the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Hormah" (Numbers 14:44–45).

Why were they defeated? Because God was not with them. They thought they were repenting and obeying God's original command to take the land. In fact they were disobeying His latest command, which was to turn back into the wilderness. The day before, they had refused to go when God said go. Now they insisted on going when God said stay. Their outward behavior had changed, but their underlying refusal to submit to God had not.

This helps us distinguish genuine repentance from an urgent effort to erase consequences. True repentance accepts God's judgment as well as acknowledging one's wrongdoing. A person may confess dishonesty and yet demand immediate restoration to a position of trust. Another may regret a reckless decision while refusing the slower work of repairing its effects. Forgiveness and the removal of every earthly consequence are

not the same thing. The condemned generation could not reverse God's sentence through one dramatic gesture.

There is another lesson here about the progress of God's revelation. Israel tried to obey a command that God had superseded with a newer one, and it brought disaster. Something similar happens when Christians take Old Testament commands or promises and apply them directly to themselves as though God had given them yesterday, ignoring the fact that a new covenant has been established by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 8:6–13). Paul warns that those who try to live under the Law of Moses place themselves under its curse (Galatians 3:10–12), and that "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

That tendency shows up in many ways. It shows up when ministers teach that the tithe is still a binding obligation on Christians. It shows up when a Bible study group reads an Old Testament passage and immediately begins applying whatever feels meaningful, as though Scripture were a buffet line. Paul told the Ephesian elders that he had been faithful because "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27). We need to know and follow the whole counsel of God, not just the parts we like, sliced and diced to fit our preferences.

At the same time, we must not swing to the opposite extreme and treat the Old Testament as spiritually useless. Paul himself draws lessons from Israel's wilderness history (1 Corinthians 10), and he says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might

have hope" (Romans 15:4). The coming of Christ changes how an Old Testament passage applies to us. It does not take away its authority as Scripture. And Paul's warning in Galatians is aimed at relying on the Law for justification, not at practicing love and righteousness that the Law also commanded. Careful teaching asks what Christ has fulfilled, what the apostles require of us, and how the earlier text helps us understand both.

A related danger is letting experience become the judge of Scripture. A pastor once explained in a conversation that he believed in a certain kind of ecstatic speaking in tongues because he had experienced it. He had not sought it; it had simply come upon him, and it felt good. Therefore, whatever the Scriptures might say, nothing could shake his conviction that it was biblical and from the Lord. And, he added, no one who had not had the experience had any right to question it.

That pastor was not a foolish man. But the story shows how even thoughtful people can get things backward, using experience to test Scripture rather than Scripture to test experience. Our own conviction is that the miraculous gifts of the apostolic age, including tongues, served their purpose in the founding of the church and are not normative today. Many sincere believers disagree, and we should examine the relevant passages together humbly rather than assuming that any experience proves either divine approval or deception. But whatever our view on that question, the principle holds: a powerful experience cannot make its own interpretation immune from examination. God warned Israel that even a prophet whose sign came true was to be rejected if he led them away from the Lord, because "The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all

your soul" (Deuteronomy 13:3). That passage concerns signs used to entice people toward other gods, and it does not settle every later debate. But it establishes the principle that even genuine experiences must be tested by God's Word. "For we live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). Paul warned Timothy that "the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Timothy 4:3). Humility is needed on all sides, and so is a willingness to let Scripture have the final word.

One more observation about Numbers 14 is sobering. The entire congregation rebelled against the Lord. It was not a few, not a minority, not even a majority. It was all of them, with only a handful of exceptions: Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb. Of the more than six hundred thousand men counted in the census, only two entered the Promised Land.

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matthew 7:13–14). Only eight people were saved from the flood. And after telling a parable about God's faithfulness to those who cry out to Him, Jesus asked a haunting question: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

Genuine, wholehearted faith may often be a minority even among those who claim the name of Christ. Why do so many surveys suggest that professing Christians live little differently

from anyone else? Why do some churches thrive less because of the Spirit than because of gifted leaders and generous budgets? Why is loving church discipline so rare? Why are Christian leaders sometimes hesitant to speak clearly where Scripture speaks clearly? Why do we sometimes defend our own groups more eagerly than we pursue biblical truth? Where the church becomes disconnected from Christ and His Word, it can become so much like the culture around it that people are converted not so much to Christ as to a comfortable cultural Christianity.

That is one reason every believer needs to study God's Word diligently. How can we discern truth from error, even in what our own pastors and teachers say, unless we are in the Word ourselves? "Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes" (Psalm 119:97-99). When we are deeply in the Word, we can rejoice when we hear the truth proclaimed and recognize when we do not.

We should hold this sobering truth alongside another. Scripture also gives us a vision of "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9). And even in Numbers 14, the two faithful spies were not the only ones who entered the land. The children whom the people had said would become plunder were brought in. The Levites, who were not counted in the military census, were not included in the sentence, and Aaron's son Eleazar was among those who entered Canaan (Joshua 14:1). God's judgment on the unbelieving generation was also the preservation of the next.

The way is narrow, and yet the redeemed will be a multitude beyond counting.

Chapter 15 comes as a surprise after the tragedy of chapter 14. It opens, "After you enter the land I am giving you as a home..." (Numbers 15:2). Just after sentencing a generation to die in the wilderness, God speaks confidently about life in the land. The promise had not been canceled. Their children would enter, and God was already giving instructions for the day they arrived. It is a remarkable word of grace.

The chapter gives regulations for the grain and drink offerings that were to accompany burnt offerings and sacrifices in the land, a land of grain, olive oil, and wine. It repeats that the foreigner and the native-born were to be treated alike: "You and the foreigner shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the foreigner residing among you" (Numbers 15:15–16). It commands an offering from the first of the dough once they had bread from the land (Numbers 15:17–21).

Then it distinguishes between two kinds of sin. For unintentional sin, whether committed by the whole community or by an individual, there was an offering, and "they will be forgiven" (Numbers 15:22–29). "But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off; their guilt remains on them" (Numbers 15:30–31).

The phrase translated "defiantly" is literally "with a high hand," the picture of a fist raised in God's face. It describes sin committed knowingly, deliberately, in open contempt for God's

word. It is one of the few passages that explicitly makes this distinction, and it is sobering in two directions.

On the one hand, how often do we give little thought to our "unintentional" sins, overlooking or quietly excusing them? God considered them weighty enough to build an entire sacrificial system around covering them. On the other hand, for defiant, premeditated sin, there was no sacrifice in the Law at all. The guilt remained.

And yet there is a striking exception in Israel's history. David's sin with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah were not unintentional. They were premeditated and concealed. They fell squarely into the category of sin for which the Law offered no sacrifice, and David knew it: "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it" (Psalm 51:16). Yet when he confessed, Nathan said, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (2 Samuel 12:13). God's grace reached a sin the sacrificial system could not reach.

That is a preview of the gospel. What the blood of animals could never atone for, the blood of Christ atones for completely. Paul declared, "Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). That is why no one is justified by the Law (Galatians 3:11; Romans 3:20). Salvation was never going to come through the Law. It comes only through God's grace in Christ, which is more far-reaching than we can imagine.

Right after this law, the chapter gives an example of defiant sin: "While the Israelites were in the wilderness, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day" (Numbers 15:32). The Sabbath command was clear, and this man openly disregarded it. Those who found him brought him to Moses, and

at the Lord's command he was put to death (Numbers 15:33–36). The penalty seems severe to us, but it came in the immediate aftermath of Kadesh, where an entire generation had defied God's word. This was not a man who had made a mistake. It was a man who, with a high hand, despised the word of God.

The chapter ends with a gentle command: "Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the LORD, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by chasing after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes" (Numbers 15:38–39). After a chapter of rebellion and a man who deliberately ignored God's word, God gave His people a visible, everyday reminder of His commands, right on their clothing. Every time an Israelite looked down, he would remember. The tassels were an aid against forgetfulness, and against following the impulses of the heart and eyes, which had just led a whole generation astray.

Jesus wore such tassels. The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touched "the edge of his cloak" (Matthew 9:20), perhaps the very tassel, and many sick people later "begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed" (Matthew 14:36). Jesus also criticized religious leaders who made "the tassels on their garments long" (Matthew 23:5), turning a reminder of God's commands into a display of their own piety. The same reminder can be used humbly or proudly.

We do not wear tassels. But we need reminders of God's Word just as much as Israel did, because we forget just as easily. The whole story of Numbers 14 is a story of forgetting.

Whatever helps us remember, whether Scripture memorized, a daily time in the Word, or the fellowship of believers who speak God's truth to us, is a gift. May we be people with "a different spirit," who follow the Lord wholeheartedly.

Lord, help us not to live with a spirit of fear toward this world, but to trust in You, so that we may stand firm in Your power and love those who are lost.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The Israelites feared the giants instead of fearing God. What are you most afraid of right now? How does Jesus' teaching in Matthew 10:28 put that fear in perspective?
2. Joshua said, "they are our bread," expecting an easy victory because the Lord was with them. What obstacle in your life would look different if you truly believed "the LORD is with us"?
3. God forgave Israel, yet the consequences of their unbelief remained. How do you respond when you have been forgiven but must still live with the consequences of a sin?
4. Caleb waited forty-five years for his inheritance because of other people's unbelief. How does his example encourage you when you suffer for choices that were not your own?
5. The day after refusing to enter the land, Israel tried to enter it against God's command. What is the difference between true repentance and an attempt to erase consequences? Have you ever tried to "fix" something God had already decided?

6. God gave Israel tassels as a daily reminder of His commands. What reminders of God's Word do you build into your everyday life? What new reminder might help you?

Chapter Eight

Numbers 16–17

The rebellion at Kadesh had doomed a generation to die in the wilderness. We might expect that sobering sentence to produce humility in the camp. Instead, it seems to have produced resentment, and in chapter 16 that resentment boils over into an organized revolt against Moses and Aaron. It is one of the most dramatic chapters in Scripture, with the earth opening, fire falling, and a plague sweeping through the camp. And at the center of it stands one of the most beautiful pictures of intercession in the Bible.

"Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites—Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth—became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council" (Numbers 16:1–2).

Look closely at who these men were. Dathan and Abiram were from the tribe of Reuben, Jacob's firstborn. Perhaps they resented the fact that leadership had passed to a Levite, when their ancestor held the birthright. Korah was a Levite, and not just any Levite. He was a Kohathite, from the same clan as Moses and Aaron. His father Izhar was the brother of Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 6:18–20). Korah was their first cousin. Only Aaron's sons could be priests, and Korah apparently envied the privilege of his cousin's line. In other words, these were relatives, envying and fighting one another. Earlier it had been Miriam and Aaron who coveted Moses'

authority. Now it was other Levites coveting Aaron's. This lust for position would cost thousands of lives.

The rebels came as a group and said to Moses and Aaron, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" (Numbers 16:3).

Korah's approach was remarkably clever. He did not talk about his own qualifications, and he did not point to any specific wrongdoing by Moses. He simply declared, in front of the whole assembly, that everyone was holy. You can almost hear the crowd murmuring agreement: "That's right! We're all just as holy as Moses and Aaron. Who do they think they are?" Emotional appeals to the crowd like this have always been a favorite tactic of those who want power.

What makes Korah's claim so dangerous is that it was half true. God really had called Israel "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Korah did not invent a falsehood. He took a genuine truth and stretched it to justify something God had never authorized: seizing a priestly role God had reserved for Aaron's family. That is exactly the tactic of the serpent in the garden. "Did God really say...?" (Genesis 3:1) was not a flat denial of God's word. It was a subtle rearrangement of it.

The Israelites did not doubt that God existed or that He was powerful. They got into trouble when they forgot, ignored, or edited what God had actually said. At the border of the land, they forgot His promise and said, "We were brought here to die." Now they blamed Moses for their failure to enter the land and accused him of exalting himself. But God had said neither thing.

Many of us know this struggle in our own lives. We become frustrated when things do not go smoothly, and we think,

"Didn't God say He would do this for me?" Then we realize that He promised something similar, but not quite that. Once we see that we have been struggling over something God never told us to expect, it becomes easier to let it go. And sometimes the thing God did say is exactly what we need. We may be discouraged to see our old sinful self rising up again, just when we thought it was gone for good. But God has said that our old self will be completely done away with when we are made perfect in Christ. Until then, we are works in progress, being sanctified. We labor, but the success of that labor is His. Blessed is His Word! The remedy for half-remembered promises is to know what God has actually said.

Moses' first response to the rebellion is telling: "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown" (Numbers 16:4). He did not defend his position. He humbled himself before God. Then he proposed a test. Korah and his followers were to bring censers with fire and incense before the Lord the next day, and "the man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy" (Numbers 16:7). And then Moses turned Korah's own words back on him: "You Levites have gone too far!"

Moses went on: "Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to do the work at the LORD's tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the LORD that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" (Numbers 16:9–11).

The Kohathites already had an honored calling. As we saw in chapter 4, they carried the most holy things of the tabernacle on their shoulders. Korah's complaint was not that he had nothing, but that he did not have everything. Envy made a real and precious calling seem insufficient because someone else held a different one. And Moses saw clearly what was really going on: the rebellion was not against Aaron, but against the Lord who had chosen him.

When Moses summoned Dathan and Abiram, they refused to come, and their reply is breathtaking: "Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? And now you also want to lord it over us! Moreover, you haven't brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey" (Numbers 16:13–14). A land flowing with milk and honey? They were describing Egypt, the land of their slavery, with the very words God had used for the Promised Land. That is how completely sin can twist our memory and our perspective.

The next day, Korah assembled his followers with their censers at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord appeared. "The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once'" (Numbers 16:20–21). Within a single chapter, God twice declared that He was ready to consume the whole congregation (Numbers 16:21, 45).

We need to let that sink in. We do not control our own time on earth, but God has all the time in the world. If His people fail, He could wipe the slate clean and start again. When will we recognize that humanity is not the center of the universe, but

God is? Apart from Him, we are a hopeless people. Our only hope is God Himself.

"But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, 'O God, the God who gives breath to all living things, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?'" (Numbers 16:22). Notice the careful way Moses prayed. He did not ask God to overlook sin or to be less than fully just. He appealed to God as the Creator who gives breath to every living thing, the One who knows every heart. In effect he was saying, "You know exactly who is guilty. Judge with that same precision, rather than destroying everyone for the sin of the ringleaders." It was a remarkable prayer to pray in the middle of a crisis. Moses was not simply begging for mercy. He was reasoning with God from God's own revealed character.

God answered by telling the assembly to move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea" (Numbers 16:28). If these men died a natural death, the Lord had not sent him. But if the Lord did something entirely new, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, then everyone would know that these men had treated the Lord with contempt.

"As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all those associated with Korah, together with their possessions. They went down alive into the realm of the dead, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community" (Numbers 16:31–33). Then "fire came out from the

LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense" (Numbers 16:35).

Many readers ask an honest and painful question at this point. Why did the wives, children, and little ones have to die for their fathers' sin? We should not rush past that question with an easy answer. The text does give us a few clues. Before the earth opened, "Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents" (Numbers 16:27). Everyone else had moved away when Moses warned them. These households stood together in defiance, apparently aligned with the rebellion rather than caught up in it by accident. But Scripture does not spell out the guilt of each individual family member, and we should be honest that this passage raises questions it does not fully answer. Holding that tension, rather than forcing a tidy resolution, may be the most faithful response.

And there is one more clue, easy to miss, that shines a remarkable light into this dark chapter. Many chapters later, Numbers tells us, "The line of Korah, however, did not die out" (Numbers 26:11). Korah's sons, it seems, did not stand with their father. They survived. And their descendants became some of the great worship leaders of Israel. Eleven psalms bear the title "Of the Sons of Korah," including Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." And one of those psalms contains a line that takes on new meaning when we remember their ancestor's story: "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (Psalm 84:10). Korah had not been content with the honored service of a Levite. He wanted the priesthood. His descendants sang that they would gladly be doorkeepers, if only

they could be near God. And in fact, Korahites later served as gatekeepers at the tabernacle and temple (1 Chronicles 9:19). God's grace reached the children of the rebel.

The censers of the 250 men were hammered into sheets to cover the altar, "to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers" (Numbers 16:40). The very instruments of rebellion became a permanent warning.

And then comes one of the most astonishing verses in Numbers. "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 'You have killed the LORD's people,' they said" (Numbers 16:41). After everything they had seen, the earth swallowing the rebels, fire consuming the 250, they still blamed Moses. Korah had poisoned their minds so thoroughly that they sincerely believed he and his companions had been martyred by an evil tyrant. That is how sin works. Paul describes it: "For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (Romans 7:11). Deception is sin's native language. It is unmistakably clear from this chapter how important it is to read and learn God's Word daily, "Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:14).

The glory of the Lord appeared again, and again God threatened to destroy the whole assembly. Again Moses and Aaron fell facedown. And a plague broke out. Moses told Aaron to take his censer, put incense in it with fire from the altar, and

"hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started" (Numbers 16:46).

"So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped" (Numbers 16:47–48).

What a picture! An old man, more than eighty years old, running with a censer into the middle of a crowd that had just been demanding his downfall, planting himself between the living and the dead, and holding back the judgment of God. Aaron's authority was exercised not for his own benefit but to save the very people who had challenged it. The priesthood Korah coveted turned out to be, above all, a ministry of intercession, standing in the gap for others at the risk of one's own life. Still, 14,700 people died before the plague stopped (Numbers 16:49).

Twice in this chapter, if Moses and Aaron had not interceded, God would have destroyed the Israelites entirely. Was it Moses' compelling argument or Aaron's swift action that stayed God's hand? Reading the text, it might seem so. But focusing only on these two men would miss the larger point: how seriously offensive rebellion is to a holy God, and what it takes to turn aside His judgment. It required humility; both times, Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the Lord. It required honoring God's own righteousness; Moses appealed to God as the Judge who knows every heart. And it required swift, wholehearted obedience; Aaron immediately did exactly what God

commanded, bringing the offering that made atonement for the people's sin.

Aaron standing between the living and the dead points us to a greater High Priest. Aaron could stop a plague for a moment. Jesus stood between us and the wrath of God by offering Himself, and He does not need to run back and forth year after year. "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Moses and Aaron were only shadows; they could not save anyone from the final judgment. But they foreshadowed the One who can.

These events were written for us. Paul warns, "And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel" (1 Corinthians 10:10). Jude lists "Korah's rebellion" alongside "the way of Cain" and "Balaam's error" as warnings to the church (Jude 11). The Lord is gracious and forgiving, but His patience is not a license for continual rebellion. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

How do we protect ourselves from the kind of deception that swept through Israel's camp? The writer of Hebrews, reflecting on Israel's rebellion in the wilderness, gives us the answer: "But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end" (Hebrews 3:13–14). It is much harder to slip a subtly false conclusion past a community of believers who regularly and actively test what they hear against the Word, together. As Christ's body, we need to keep

encouraging one another daily, so that none of us falls into sin's deception and hardens our hearts against the Lord.

What about leadership in the church today? Should pastors, teachers, and elders be given the kind of honor and distinction that God gave to Moses and Aaron? Some leaders have claimed something like it for themselves, as though to question them were to join Korah's rebellion. But Moses and Aaron held unique appointments in a unique moment of redemptive history, and those appointments cannot be borrowed to place any modern minister beyond accountability.

Moses himself is the best model here. He did not covet his authority. When God first called him, he begged God to send someone else. When Joshua wanted to silence Eldad and Medad, Moses said, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets" (Numbers 11:29). He interceded again and again for people who opposed him, and turned down God's offer to make him the father of a great nation. He did not defend his own position; God defended it. And when Scripture calls him "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3), we should understand that as God's own assessment, spoken through His Word. "For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The Spirit worked through genuine human authors, with their own language and memories, but the testimony is God's.

Under the new covenant, Jesus taught all His followers, whether leaders or not, not to covet positions of authority, whether in business, government, or the church. When the disciples argued about which of them was the greatest, He said, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who

exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.... I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25–27). If we want to excel, Jesus calls us to excel in serving. That does not mean neglecting our gifts. It means having a servant's attitude and not seeking titles or positions for the sake of exercising authority over others.

Jesus also said, "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:8–12).

Taken at face value, this suggests that believers should not give honorific titles to one another in the church. Our own conviction leans in that direction. Titles like "Reverend" or "Father" are never given to Christian leaders in the New Testament, and the principle that "you are all brothers" seems to reach beyond the specific words Jesus named. Doing without such titles would take nothing away from the work of pastors and teachers, but it would remove any presumed honor attached to the office, humble some who hold titles, and cause others to covet them less. We recognize that this would be a hard sell in many churches today.

We also recognize that faithful Christians read this passage differently. Many believe Jesus was forbidding the status-seeking and spiritual domination that such titles expressed

among the religious leaders of His day, rather than every use of the words themselves. They point out that Paul could describe his relationship to his converts with the image of fatherhood: "in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Corinthians 4:15). And Paul says that "Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1), with the emphasis on the work and the character it requires, not on prestige. In civil life, Scripture tells us to give "honor" to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7).

Whatever conclusion we reach about titles, the deeper test goes beyond forms of address. A leader who refuses every title can still dominate others through personality, expertise, or claims of special spirituality. The questions that really matter are these: Can a congregation question its leaders without being compared to Korah? Do leaders share responsibility, receive correction, protect the vulnerable, and honor service that brings no recognition? Peter told the elders of the church to shepherd God's flock "not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). Christ's greatness was seen in His service, and those who represent Him should make His care more visible than their own importance.

There is a lesson here for every believer, not only for leaders. A popular historical drama about a royal family, full of jealous and murderous conflict between brothers, returns again and again to a single theme: no matter how the princes scheme, they cannot thwart what the drama calls "the will of heaven." In any given episode, the plans of powerful and crafty men seem to prevail, but a few episodes later, everything bends back to heaven's will. That is a striking echo of biblical truth. Korah, Dathan, and Abiram tried to overturn God's choice. What they

failed to understand was that Moses and Aaron had not been chosen on the basis of merit or by a vote of the people. They had been appointed by God. To contest their leadership was to contest God's authority, a very foolish thing to do.

None of us should be jealous of our brothers and sisters in Christ, or of anyone else. When John the Baptist's disciples were troubled that more people were following Jesus than John, John answered, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven" (John 3:27). Let us be thankful for what God has given us, praise Him for His wisdom in distributing gifts and callings, and be wholeheartedly faithful in what He has called us to do.

Chapter 17 brings the conflict over the priesthood to a close with a quiet but unforgettable sign. God told Moses to collect twelve wooden staffs, one from the leader of each tribe, with each leader's name written on his staff and Aaron's name on the staff of Levi. The staffs were placed in the tent of meeting overnight. "The staff belonging to the man I choose will sprout, and I will rid myself of this constant grumbling against you by the Israelites" (Numbers 17:5).

"The next day Moses entered the tent of the covenant law and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the tribe of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds" (Numbers 17:8). A dead stick of wood had, overnight, gone through the whole cycle of life: buds, blossoms, and ripe fruit. There could be no argument. God had chosen Aaron.

The Lord told Moses to put Aaron's staff back in front of the ark of the covenant law, "to be kept as a sign to the rebellious. This will put an end to their grumbling against me, so that they will not die" (Numbers 17:10). Hebrews tells us that the ark

came to hold three things: "the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant" (Hebrews 9:4). Each was a reminder: of God's provision, of God's chosen priesthood, and of God's law.

Notice how God confirmed Aaron's priesthood. Korah's test ended in death; this test ended in life. The mark of the true priest was that God brought life from what was dead. That points us, once again, to the One whose priesthood was confirmed not by a budding staff but by an empty tomb. Jesus is our High Priest, as Hebrews says, "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life" (Hebrews 7:16).

The chapter ends with the people finally terrified: "We will 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?" (Numbers 17:12–13). Moses gives no answer. But they should already have known it. God had given it at Kadesh, when He said, "As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall" (Numbers 14:28–29). They had said, "If only we had died in this wilderness!" and God had granted it. They had said their children would be taken as plunder, and God had turned it around: the children would enter the land as heirs.

There is a pattern here worth noticing. Sometimes God's judgment takes the shape of the very thing we insisted on. Israel demanded meat and received it until it became loathsome. They wished to die in the wilderness, and they did. Such judgments are not arbitrary. They are the granting of what was demanded, and that is a more unsettling kind of consequence than any punishment chosen at random.

But the people's cry of fear also sets up the next chapter. How could sinful people come near a holy God and live? God's answer, as we will see, was to give them priests who would bear the responsibility for the sanctuary, so that His wrath would not fall on the people again. And beyond Aaron stands the One who opened the way for all of us, so that we need not cry, "We are all lost," but can "approach God's throne of grace with confidence" (Hebrews 4:16).

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Korah took a true statement ("The whole community is holy") and used it to justify rebellion. How can a half-truth be more dangerous than an outright lie? Where have you seen God's words stretched or edited to justify something He never said?
2. Korah was not content with the honored calling of a Levite, while his descendants later sang that they would rather be doorkeepers in God's house. Are you content with the calling God has given you, or do you find yourself envying someone else's?
3. Aaron ran into the crowd that had opposed him and "stood between the living and the dead." Whom is God calling you to stand in the gap for through prayer, even if they have opposed you?
4. After seeing God's judgment, the people still blamed Moses and said, "You have killed the LORD's people." How does sin distort the way we see reality? What safeguards does Hebrews 3:13 offer?

5. Jesus warned against seeking titles and taught that the greatest must be the servant. How should this shape the way leaders lead and the way congregations relate to their leaders?
6. Aaron's dead staff budded, blossomed, and bore fruit overnight. How does this sign point to Jesus, our High Priest "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life"?

Chapter Nine

Numbers 18–20

Chapter 17 ended with a cry of terror: "Anyone who even comes near the tabernacle of the LORD will die. Are we all going to die?" (Numbers 17:13). Chapters 18 and 19 are God's answer to that question. He provides priests who will bear the responsibility for the sanctuary, and a way of cleansing from the defilement of death. Then chapter 20 moves forward nearly forty years and brings us three deaths, a refusal, and one of the most painful moments in the life of Moses.

"The LORD said to Aaron, 'You, your sons and your family are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the sanctuary, and you and your sons alone are to bear the responsibility for offenses connected with the priesthood'" (Numbers 18:1). The people feared that coming near God's dwelling would destroy them. God's answer was that the priests would stand between the people and the holy things, and would bear the weight of any offense. "You are to be responsible for the care of the sanctuary and the altar, so that my wrath will not fall on the Israelites again" (Numbers 18:5).

Twice in this passage God uses the word "gift." "I myself 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" (Numbers 18:6). And to Aaron: "I am giving you the service of the priesthood as a gift" (Numbers 18:7). The honor of serving the Lord directly was a great gift.

Why was it given to Aaron and the Levites? It is tempting to connect it with the Levites' faithfulness at Mount Sinai, when Moses cried, "Whoever is for the LORD, come to me," and the

Levites rallied to him (Exodus 32:26). That is a reasonable connection, but we should admit that it is a conjecture; the Bible never directly makes it. And the Levites may not have been innocent in the golden calf incident either. They may simply have sided with Moses as one sides with a relative. More strikingly, it was Aaron himself who asked the people for their gold, fashioned the calf, built the altar before it, and led the idolatrous worship. His explanation afterward sounds almost ludicrous: "Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:24). Even if he caved under pressure from the people, it showed a real weakness in his integrity and faith. The priesthood, then, was not a reward for Aaron's merit. It was a gift of sovereign grace. "And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was" (Hebrews 5:4).

Notice, too, the difference in how the two gifts were described. The priesthood was given to Aaron as a gift. The Levites were themselves given to Aaron as a gift, servants to assist the priests. They did not choose their role by vote or by preference. It was appointed by God.

And now, astonishingly, the privilege so carefully guarded in Numbers 18 has been extended to every believer. Peter tells all Christians, "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). As God calls us to serve Him in the church, in whatever capacity, it should be an honor to us, a gift received with gratitude.

The chapter goes on to describe the priests' portion. They were to receive the holy offerings the people brought, the

firstfruits of the land, the firstborn of clean animals, and the redemption money for firstborn sons and unclean animals (Numbers 18:8-19). This was confirmed as "an everlasting covenant of salt before the LORD" (Numbers 18:19), salt being a symbol of permanence and preservation. But the priests would receive no territory in the land: "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites" (Numbers 18:20).

What a statement! Every other tribe would receive fields, vineyards, and pastures. Aaron's family received God Himself. The psalmist later made those words his own: "LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure" (Psalm 16:5). And in the ruins of Jerusalem, Jeremiah could still say, "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lamentations 3:24). We should serve God with gratitude and satisfaction, knowing that He is our portion too.

Then the chapter describes the tithe. "I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting" (Numbers 18:21). The Levites, like the priests, received no tribal territory, though they were given towns with pasturelands in which to live, and their houses there were protected by law (Leviticus 25:32-34; Joshua 21). The tithe was their wages for their service.

And the Levites themselves were to tithe: "When you receive from the Israelites the tithe I give you as your inheritance, you must present a tenth of that tithe as the LORD's offering" (Numbers 18:26). This tithe of the tithe went to Aaron and the priests. And it had to be the best: "You must present as the LORD's portion the best and holiest part of everything given to

you" (Numbers 18:29). The rest they could eat anywhere with their households, "for it is your wages for your work at the tent of meeting" (Numbers 18:31).

This passage is the fullest description of the tithe in the Law, and it tells us several important things. The tithe was part of a specific arrangement tied to the tabernacle, the priesthood, and the Levites' lack of land. It consisted primarily of the produce of the land, grain and wine and oil and livestock, to be eaten. Deuteronomy allowed it to be converted into money when the journey to the sanctuary was too long, but that money was then to be spent on food and drink to be enjoyed "in the presence of the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 14:24–26). And those who received the people's tithes were not exempt from giving themselves. The Levites gave a tenth of what they received, and they gave the best.

This passage raises the question of how Christians should give, and we should address it honestly. The book of Malachi is often preached as a command for Christians to tithe: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it" (Malachi 3:10).

Some, ourselves among them, have noticed that much of Malachi is addressed to the priests and Levites. It rebukes them for offering blemished sacrifices (Malachi 1:6–14), for corrupt teaching (Malachi 2:1–9), and it promises to purify "the Levites" (Malachi 3:3). And according to Nehemiah, it was the Levites who were responsible for bringing "a tenth of the tithes up to the house of our God, to the storerooms of the treasury" (Nehemiah 10:38). Perhaps, some have suggested, the Levites

were keeping the best tenth for themselves rather than bringing it to the priests. Others point out that Malachi 3:9 explicitly addresses "your whole nation," and that elsewhere "All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and olive oil into the storerooms" (Nehemiah 13:12). So we should hold that particular reading of Malachi with some humility.

But whatever the precise audience of Malachi 3, it was addressed to Israel under the old covenant, in connection with the temple and its priesthood. Our conviction that Christians are not obligated to tithe does not rest mainly on the details of Malachi. It rests on the relationship between the covenants. The tithe belonged to the Mosaic Law, with its sanctuary, priests, and land, and Christ has fulfilled that system. Many faithful Christians disagree and see the tithe as a continuing baseline for Christian giving, and they hold that view sincerely. We believe the New Testament replaces the tithe with something different, not merely another way of giving ten percent.

That is not a license for stinginess. Freedom from a fixed percentage is not freedom from the claims of love. The New Testament affirms that those who preach the gospel should be supported (1 Corinthians 9:14). It calls believers to give willingly, generously, and in proportion to what they have, to meet real needs: "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Many believers, freely and gladly, give far more than a tenth. And the principle of Numbers 18:29 still applies in spirit. We should not give God our leftovers, whether money, possessions, time, or skills, but our best.

The same chapter holds the receivers of gifts to account: "By presenting the best part of it you will not be guilty in this matter; then you will not defile the holy offerings of the Israelites, and you will not die" (Numbers 18:32). Those who handled the people's gifts were not to treat them as ordinary income. Church leaders today should likewise treat what God's people give as holy. It should not be wasted, but used honestly and responsibly for the Lord's work. When Paul carried the offering of the Gentile churches to Jerusalem, he arranged for trusted representatives to travel with it: "We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man" (2 Corinthians 8:20–21).

There is a real danger that money, whether salaries, facilities, building projects, or budgets, can distract the church from the One "who though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9). A church can ask itself whether its budget truly serves teaching, care, mission, and people in need; whether its financial decisions are transparent; and whether members are being pressured with promises God has not made to them. At the same time, buildings and salaries are not in themselves proof of corruption, any more than a small budget is proof of purity. The question is whether resources serve the gospel or the institution's prestige. And when we disagree with how a church handles these matters, we should do so carefully and graciously, without presuming to know the hidden motives of others.

The Levites' responsibility has one more application. If they failed in their duties, it affected not only themselves but their families, and not only their families but the whole worshipping

community. As Christians, we are in a sense a priesthood to the world. Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world.... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:13–16). Our saltiness and our light depend on our dependence on God and our devotion to His Word.

If you are reading through the Bible in a year, it may be about this time that your reading has begun to lag. Perhaps you have fallen behind, or your prayers have shrunk to a quick word before meals. Don't give up! And don't try to make up everything you missed at once; that burden of guilt is what most often ends the practice altogether. Simply pick up where the plan is today, and fill in the gaps later if time allows. Even the Levites served in rotation, with rest built into their service. Persevere, dear friends, persevere.

Chapter 19 provides for a problem that had become urgent. After the plague that followed Korah's rebellion, in which 14,700 people died, the camp would have been full of people who had handled dead bodies. And over the coming decades, an entire generation would die in the wilderness. Contact with death made a person unclean, and the unclean could not come near the tabernacle. How could they be cleansed?

God's answer was the ritual of the red heifer. "Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer without defect or blemish and that has never been under a yoke" (Numbers 19:2). It was to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in the presence of Eleazar the priest, and its blood sprinkled toward the tent of meeting seven times. Then the whole animal was burned, and "The priest is to take some cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer" (Numbers 19:6), the

same three elements used in the cleansing of the one healed of a skin disease. The ashes were gathered and kept outside the camp, "for use in the water of cleansing; it is for purification from sin" (Numbers 19:9).

Anyone who touched a dead body was unclean for seven days. "They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then they will be clean" (Numbers 19:12). A small amount of the ashes mixed with fresh water was sprinkled on them with a sprig of hyssop, and they were clean.

There is a curious paradox in this ritual. Everyone involved in preparing the ashes, the priest, the man who burned the heifer, and the one who gathered the ashes, became unclean until evening (Numbers 19:7–10). The very thing that cleansed others defiled those who handled it. Even the ancient rabbis found this puzzling. Christians have seen in it a hint of the One who became sin for us so that we might be made clean, who "suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood" (Hebrews 13:12).

Hebrews makes the connection explicit: "The blood of goats and bulls and 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!" (Hebrews 9:13–14). The red heifer cleansed people who had touched death. Christ cleanses us from "acts that lead to death," the dead works of sin, and makes us fit to serve the living God.

Chapter 20 begins with a quiet, sad sentence: "In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of

Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried" (Numbers 20:1). Comparing this with Aaron's death later in the chapter, which Numbers 33:38 dates to the fortieth year, it seems that almost four decades have passed since the rebellion at Kadesh. The wandering is nearly over. The generation that refused the land has almost entirely died out. And Miriam, the sister who had watched over baby Moses in the reeds and led the women in song at the sea, is buried in the wilderness without seeing the Promised Land.

And immediately, the new generation sounds like the old one. There was no water, and "They quarreled with Moses and said, 'If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! Why did you bring the LORD's community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!'" (Numbers 20:3–5). Forty years had passed, and the complaint was the same.

Once again, "Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them" (Numbers 20:6). And God gave instructions: "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water" (Numbers 20:8).

"So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him" (Numbers 20:9). Which staff was this? It may have been Moses' own staff, which had parted the sea. But the phrase "from the LORD's presence" suggests it may have been Aaron's staff that had budded, which had been placed before the ark as "a sign to the rebellious" (Numbers 17:10). We cannot be

certain. If it was Aaron's staff, it was meant as a reminder of God's power to bring life from what was dead, and of the rebellion God had already judged.

Then Moses did something he had never done before. "He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?' Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank" (Numbers 20:10–11).

Notice that God still gave the water. The people were thirsty, and the Lord provided for them even though their leader had failed. God's grace to His people did not depend on the perfection of His servant. But then came the verdict: "But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them'" (Numbers 20:12).

What exactly did Moses do wrong? Jewish and Christian interpreters alike have wrestled with this question for centuries without full agreement. It helps to compare this event with a similar one nearly forty years earlier. In Exodus 17, at Rephidim, the people also complained about water. Moses rebuked them: "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?" (Exodus 17:2). God told him, "Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink" (Exodus 17:6), and Moses obeyed. No wrongdoing was mentioned.

Now, at Kadesh, several things were different. God told Moses to speak to the rock, but he struck it, and struck it twice. Perhaps he relied on what had worked before rather than trusting the new instruction. He spoke to the people in anger,

calling them rebels. He said, "must we bring you water," as though the power were his and Aaron's rather than God's. And rather than honoring God before the people, he seems to have let his frustration take center stage.

Scripture itself emphasizes different aspects. Numbers says Moses and Aaron did not trust God enough "to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites" (Numbers 20:12). Deuteronomy says they "broke faith with me in the presence of the Israelites... and... did not uphold my holiness among the Israelites" (Deuteronomy 32:51). The psalmist points to Moses' words: "By the waters of Meribah they angered the LORD, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips" (Psalm 106:32-33). Notice that even the psalmist acknowledges that Moses was provoked. That does not erase the consequence, but it is an honest recognition that even a leader's failure has a context. It is best to hold these explanations together rather than force a single answer. Whatever the precise combination, the heart of the matter is that the leader who represented God before Israel misrepresented Him at a crucial public moment.

For us, the lesson is plain enough. The constant complaining of the people had pushed Moses to his breaking point. When we let the cares of this world or the provocations of people get to us, we tend to strike out instead of speaking out, and we can lose a blessing in the process. God calls us to look beyond our circumstances and do what He has told us to do.

The consequence seems severe. One incident, and Moses was kept from the goal toward which he had led a rebellious people for forty long years. Yet we should remember that it was also a single incident at Kadesh that sentenced the whole

generation to die in the wilderness. In both cases, Scripture says God showed Himself holy (Numbers 20:13). The severity of the consequence was not measured by how the act might look to human eyes, but by what it communicated about God before the very people who were watching. Leaders bear a heavier responsibility precisely because their actions represent God to others. "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

Some people say they are thankful that God is different now than He was in Moses' day. But He is not. "I the LORD do not change" (Malachi 3:6). God's perfect justice is exactly why His only Son had to die for our sins. We should never treat God's grace as an excuse for insolence, arrogance, or complacency. We need to remember that our God is not only our loving Father but also our holy Lord, and that we live entirely by His mercy. We should fear Him and tremble before His holiness, and at the same time rest in His love.

The place was named Meribah, meaning "quarreling," "where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he was proved holy among them" (Numbers 20:13). Paul later tells us something remarkable about the rock that gave Israel water in the wilderness: "they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). If that is so, the story of Meribah takes on new depth. At Meribah, Moses struck the rock in anger, and he was judged for it. At the cross, the true Rock was struck once for all, according to God's own plan, and the response from that Rock was not judgment on those who struck Him, but a prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke

23:34). And from that Rock flows living water for all who are thirsty: "To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life" (Revelation 21:6).

Moses did not lose his salvation at Meribah. God allowed him to see the whole land from the top of Mount Nebo before he died: "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it" (Deuteronomy 34:4). Deuteronomy's final tribute honors him as the prophet "whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). And centuries later, Moses did stand in the Promised Land, on the Mount of Transfiguration, where he and Elijah appeared with Jesus and "spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:30–31). God's discipline was real, and so was His grace.

Jude mentions a mysterious dispute over Moses' body: "But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" (Jude 9). We are not told what claim the devil made. Satan's name means "accuser," and Scripture calls him "the accuser of our brothers and sisters" (Revelation 12:10). It is possible, though we can only speculate, that he tried to lay claim to Moses because of his disobedience at Meribah. If so, Michael did not argue the case on its merits. He appealed to the Lord's own authority. And that is exactly what we can do when Satan accuses us of all the evil in our lives. We do not defend ourselves on the basis of our own record. We lay claim to the blood of Jesus, which "purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

So we can look at Moses' story in two ways. We can look at it with fear, knowing that we too will give an account for our disobedience. And we can look at it with joy, knowing that even

under discipline, our salvation rests on God's grace and not on our record.

Moses' failure should also make us reflect on our priorities. A busy life is full of important matters: managing finances, leading at work, planning for our children's future. But all these things pale in comparison with our hope in the Lord and the mission He has given us. The Lord is holy, and we must treat Him as holy in our lives. Jesus told us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). We do not do this so that He will supply our every need; we must do it whether He supplies our needs as we would like or not. He must be first, foremost, and central in our lives, because He alone is Lord.

The rest of chapter 20 records two more events on the road. Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom, asking permission to pass through his territory on the main road, the King's Highway: "This is what your brother Israel says" (Numbers 20:14). Israel promised not to go through any field or vineyard or even drink water from any well without paying for it. "But Edom answered: 'You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword'" (Numbers 20:18). And Edom came out with a large and powerful army.

The Edomites were descended from Esau, Jacob's brother. So Israel's own relatives refused them passage. God had told Israel not to fight them: "do not provoke them to war, for I will not give you any of their land" (Deuteronomy 2:5), and "Do not despise an Edomite, for the Edomites are related to you" (Deuteronomy 23:7). So "Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them" (Numbers 20:21), and took the long way around. It was an act of restraint and obedience.

But Edom's hostility toward its brother did not end there, and centuries later it became the subject of an entire prophetic book. Obadiah pronounced judgment on Edom "Because of the violence against your brother Jacob" (Obadiah 10), and because when Jerusalem was plundered, "you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth... you were like one of them" (Obadiah 11). What began as a refusal at the border became a long pattern of betrayal. In Scripture, how people treat their own family tends to matter far longer than the original incident might suggest.

Finally, Israel came to Mount Hor, near the border of Edom, and God told Moses that Aaron's time had come. "Remove Aaron's garments and put them on his son Eleazar, for Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will die there" (Numbers 20:26). Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar climbed the mountain in the sight of the whole community. There Moses removed his brother's high priestly garments and placed them on his nephew. "And Aaron died there on top of the mountain" (Numbers 20:28). When they came down, the people knew. "All the Israelites mourned for him thirty days" (Numbers 20:29).

In one chapter, Moses lost his sister and his brother. The siblings who had led Israel out of Egypt together, and who had sometimes quarreled among themselves, were gone. And Moses knew that his own death would come before the people entered the land.

The transfer of the garments is a picture of an important truth. Aaron's priesthood did not die with him; it passed to his son. But it could only pass on because Aaron could not continue. Hebrews draws the contrast: "Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in

office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:23–25). No one will ever need to remove our High Priest's garments. He will never die again, and He will never stop interceding for us.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The priesthood was given to Aaron "as a gift," even though he had made the golden calf. How does it change your view of serving God to see it as an undeserved gift rather than an earned position?
2. God told Aaron, "I am your share and your inheritance." Can you honestly say with the psalmist, "LORD, you alone are my portion"? What competes with God for that place in your heart?
3. The Levites had to give "the best and holiest part" of what they received. Whether or not you believe the tithe applies to Christians, are you giving God your best or your leftovers, in money, time, and abilities?
4. The ashes of the red heifer cleansed those who had touched death, yet made those who prepared them unclean. How does this help you understand what Christ did for you, according to Hebrews 9:13–14?
5. At Meribah, Moses struck the rock in anger and misrepresented God before the people. When have frustration or provocation led you to "strike out" rather than obey? What helps you honor God as holy in front of others, even under pressure?

6. Edom refused to let its "brother" Israel pass, and that hostility lasted for centuries. Is there a broken relationship within your family that you need to address before it hardens into a lasting pattern?

Chapter Ten

Numbers 21–22

The wilderness years are almost over. Miriam and Aaron have died. The generation that refused the land has nearly passed away. Now, in the fortieth year, Israel begins to move toward Canaan again, and for the first time in a long while, the story includes victories. But it also includes one more complaint, one more judgment, and one of the most beautiful pictures of salvation in the Old Testament. Then, in chapter 22, the scene shifts to the court of a frightened king and a hired seer, and to a donkey that speaks.

The chapter opens with a battle. "When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: 'If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.' The LORD listened to Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns; so the place was named Hormah" (Numbers 21:1–3).

The name Hormah should ring a bell. It was at Hormah, nearly forty years earlier, that the rebellious generation was beaten back when they tried to take the land without God (Numbers 14:45). Now, at the same place, the new generation won. What was the difference? The first time, Israel went up presumptuously, against God's command, "though neither Moses nor the ark of the LORD's covenant moved from the camp" (Numbers 14:44). This time, they went to the Lord first,

and He gave them the victory. Everything depends on whether God is with us.

In this victory we also see God's promises being fulfilled. Centuries earlier, He had promised Abraham the land of the Canaanites and Amorites (Genesis 15:18–21), and He had told Moses, "My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out" (Exodus 23:23). The covenant was coming to fulfillment, and God alone would be the deliverer.

The Hebrew word behind "totally destroy" is *herem*, and it is worth understanding. It refers to something devoted or set apart to the Lord in a way that removes it entirely from ordinary use, whether by destruction or by dedication. The name Hormah comes from the same root. Israel was vowing not to take plunder for themselves, but to devote the whole city to God, like a whole burnt offering from which nothing was held back. That helps explain why, later, taking plunder from a devoted city was treated as stealing from God.

These passages about the conquest of Canaan are among the hardest in the Old Testament, and understanding the vocabulary does not by itself resolve the moral difficulty. We will face them more fully when we come to the book of Joshua. But a few things should be said now.

Some have suggested that the Canaanites were destroyed because of Noah's curse on Canaan, Ham's son (Genesis 9:25). But Scripture does not make that connection. Many generations had passed since Noah, and the Bible gives a much more direct reason. The land was defiled by what the Canaanites themselves did: "Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and

the land vomited out its inhabitants" (Leviticus 18:25). And God warned Israel that "if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you" (Leviticus 18:28). The principle was never about bloodline. It was about conduct, and God applied the same standard to Israel as to Canaan. As we saw in Leviticus, He had waited more than four hundred years, "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16). Nor was Israel given the land because of its own goodness: "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations" (Deuteronomy 9:5).

Christians have offered several ways of understanding these texts. Some point out that the language of total destruction resembles the conventional war language of the ancient world, and that the Bible itself goes on to describe Canaanites still living in the land after their "complete" destruction. Others emphasize that these were unrepeatable acts of judgment on specific peoples at a specific moment in history. Some find no explanation fully satisfying and hold the difficulty in tension with their trust in God's character as revealed in Christ. But two things should be said plainly, whatever explanation we find most persuasive. First, these were commands given to one nation at one moment in God's plan, and the New Testament forbids any application of them to Christian conduct. "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does" (2 Corinthians 10:3). Vengeance belongs to God (Romans 12:19), and Christ's followers are commanded to love their enemies. Second, these passages have in fact been misused through history, invoked to justify conquest and the

displacement of other peoples by casting them as "Canaanites." That history is a reason to handle this material carefully and to say clearly what it does not permit.

Then comes the last complaint of the wilderness journey. "They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'" (Numbers 21:4–5).

The detour around Edom was long and hard, and the people's frustration boiled over. And notice what they said. "There is no bread!" and in the same breath, "we detest this miserable food!" They had bread. God had fed them with manna from heaven every single day for almost forty years. But they had grown so weary of it that they no longer counted it as food at all. The provision that had kept them alive had become, in their eyes, evidence that God meant to kill them.

We should be honest: their hunger, thirst, and weariness were real. They had eaten the same strange food day after day, week after week, year after year. And this was by God's design. Moses would later explain: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the LORD your God disciplines you" (Deuteronomy 8:3–5). God allowed them to be hungry and fed them with unusual food so that they would find their satisfaction not in food but in Him. That does not mean

food does not matter; God taught the lesson by actually feeding them. But bread is not ultimate. The God who gives it is.

It is easy to read this and think, "How could they?" They had just seen the Canaanites delivered into their hands. They walked every day beneath the pillar of cloud and fire. They were still eating miraculous food. And yet the complaints kept coming. But this passage should sting us. We see the same pattern even in some of the spiritual giants of the New Testament. John the Baptist, who had heard God's voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism, later sent from prison to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:3). The disciples doubted after the crucifixion. It seems that all of us are prone to forget the wonders and grace God has shown us, victory one day and grumbling the next. And knowing that about us, Jesus still died for us. Instead of reading this as the story of foolish Israelites long ago, we should see ourselves in it, and give thanks all the more for His grace.

Perhaps the Israelites were thinking, "This is not what we bargained for when we left Egypt." They had imagined that freedom meant ease and a life without accountability. They had been rescued from generations of grueling slavery and from a Pharaoh who tried to kill their babies. But they had not counted on the fact that they were moving from an evil taskmaster, who had their destruction in mind, to a good Master, who had their ultimate good in mind. Freedom did not mean having no master. It meant having a good one. Paul says the same of us: "though you used to be slaves to sin... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:17–18). And Jesus describes His service this way: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

"Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died" (Numbers 21:6). This time, the people did not argue. "The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people" (Numbers 21:7).

God's answer was surprising. He did not take the snakes away. Instead, "The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived" (Numbers 21:8-9).

On the surface, it seems a strange remedy. But the power was never in the metal. It was in God's promise, and the only thing required of the dying person was to look. There was no penance to perform, no sacrifice to bring, no ritual to complete. They simply had to look and believe that God would do what He said. The snakes came as a result of God's judgment; the deliverance came through God's grace.

Jesus Himself made the connection: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him" (John 3:14-15). The very next verse is the most famous verse in the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus was predicting the manner of His death. He too would be lifted up on a pole: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). The bronze snake offered healing from the venom of snakes. The cross offers healing from the deadly venom of sin,

and eternal life to all who look to Christ in faith. What a beautiful picture of the Christian faith! We are saved not by what we do but by where we look. "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

There is a sad postscript to the story. Israel kept the bronze snake, perhaps as a reminder of God's power, much as the jar of manna and Aaron's staff were kept. But centuries later, King Hezekiah "broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)" (2 Kings 18:4). The object God had used to save lives had become an idol. The people had begun looking at the sign instead of looking through it to the God it pointed to. Even something God commanded, even something with genuine historical and spiritual significance, can become an idol when our worship drifts toward the object instead of staying fixed on God. We should remember that when we are tempted to treat any religious object, place, or tradition as though it had power in itself.

The rest of chapter 21 moves quickly. Israel journeyed around Moab, and the text quotes a few lines from "the Book of the Wars of the LORD" (Numbers 21:14). This was apparently a collection of victory songs or accounts of Israel's battles, now lost. It is one of several sources the biblical writers mention without quoting at length, along with the Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18) and the book of the annals of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41). The inspired authors sometimes drew on ordinary historical records, as any ancient historian would, without those records themselves being part of Scripture.

At a place called Beer, which means "well," God provided water without any complaint at all: "Gather the people together and I will give them water." And Israel sang, "Spring up, O well! Sing about it" (Numbers 21:16–17). For once, the provision of water was met with a song rather than a quarrel.

Then came the first great victories of the new generation. Israel sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, asking to pass peacefully through his territory, just as they had asked Edom. But this time, "Sihon would not let Israel pass through his territory. He mustered his entire army and marched out into the wilderness against Israel" (Numbers 21:23). The Amorites were not Israel's relatives, and God gave Israel the victory. "Israel, however, put him to the sword and took over his land" (Numbers 21:24). Then Og, king of Bashan, came out against them, a giant of a man whose iron bed was more than thirteen feet long (Deuteronomy 3:11). "The LORD said to Moses, 'Do not be afraid of him, for I have delivered him into your hands'" (Numbers 21:34). And Israel defeated him too.

These victories were remembered in Israel's songs for generations: God "struck down great kings... Sihon king of the Amorites... and Og king of Bashan—His love endures forever" (Psalm 136:17–20). After so many chapters of complaint and judgment, how refreshing it is to read of victory after victory. We might wish every Christian life were like that. But there is "a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). How sweet these victories must have tasted after forty years of discipline! No one enjoys discipline while it lasts. "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it"

(Hebrews 12:11). God's discipline has a purpose and an end. Whatever we are going through today, let us not lose sight of the light shining through the storm, for the Lord has already won the victory for us.

Why did Israel have to suffer those forty years? God wanted His people to trust and obey Him in spite of their circumstances, not only when times were good but also when times were hard. There is an important lesson here. God is not merely our great Benefactor in the sky, obligated to give us what we want. He is God. He does not need us. We need Him. Our existence and our eternal destiny depend entirely on Him. Scripture does freely celebrate God as generous and compassionate, and it is right to receive His gifts with gratitude. But whatever our circumstances, there is only one fitting response to such a God: to worship Him.

That does not mean we must pretend our hardships are not real. Paul, who wrote, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses," first "pleaded with the Lord" three times to take his affliction away (2 Corinthians 12:8–9). Asking God for relief is not a lack of faith. We may seek food, rest, treatment, and protection while learning to depend on Him. We can name our exhaustion honestly without accusing God of malice, receive His ordinary provisions without despising them, and confess that Christ gives us something deeper than immediate comfort.

Jesus faced a crowd much like Israel in the wilderness. After He fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, they followed Him, remembering the manna their ancestors had eaten. But they had missed the point of the sign. "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do

not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:26–27). Then He declared, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), and spoke of eating His flesh and drinking His blood. Many found this a hard saying and walked away. Jesus turned to the Twelve and asked if they wanted to leave too. Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68–69). Peter did not understand everything Jesus had said. But he knew who Jesus was, and that was enough to keep him following. That is the heart of trust.

Chapter 22 shifts the scene dramatically. Israel was now camped on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho. "Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people" (Numbers 22:2–3). Balak's fear was understandable. He had just watched Israel destroy the kingdoms of Sihon and Og. "This horde is going to lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field" (Numbers 22:4).

What Balak did not know was that he had nothing to fear from Israel. God had already told Moses, "Do not harass the Moabites or provoke them to war, for I will not give you any part of their land. I have given Ar to the descendants of Lot as a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:9). Moab was descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew, and God had given them their own inheritance. Balak's fear drove him to do the very thing that would bring trouble on his nation.

This marks the beginning of a long and troubled relationship between Israel and Moab. Like Israel, Moab would eventually be judged for its pride and fall to Babylon. And yet, remarkably,

when Jeremiah prophesied Moab's downfall, he recorded God's grief over them: "Therefore I wail over Moab, for all Moab I cry out" (Jeremiah 48:31). "So my heart laments for Moab like the music of a pipe" (Jeremiah 48:36). And the oracle ends with a promise: "'Yet I will restore the fortunes of Moab in days to come,' declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 48:47). Even a Moabite woman, Ruth, would become an ancestor of David and of Jesus.

It is easy to assume that God cared only about Israel and meant for Israel to destroy every nation they encountered. But God had plans for other nations too. Even His judgment on guilty nations was never celebrated as satisfying in itself; it was paired with real sorrow. Like Moab, many people today do not realize that God has a genuine plan to bless them. Instead of turning to the Lord, they take matters into their own hands. What is the "Balaam" in our own lives, the thing we fall back on instead of trusting God? And when we do, does God weep for us too?

Balak sent messengers "to summon Balaam son of Beor, who was at Pethor, near the Euphrates River, in his native land" (Numbers 22:5). His request was simple: "Now come and put a curse on these people, because they are too powerful for me.... For I know that whoever you bless is blessed, and whoever you curse is cursed" (Numbers 22:6). The elders of Moab and Midian came "taking with them the fee for divination" (Numbers 22:7).

Who was Balaam? He was not an Israelite. Deuteronomy tells us he came "from Pethor in Aram Naharaim" (Deuteronomy 23:4), that is, from Mesopotamia. Some have tried to connect him with Edom because an early Edomite king was named "Bela son of Beor" (Genesis 36:32), but the similarity of names does not establish that they were the same person or family. Remarkably, Balaam is one of the few Old Testament

figures mentioned outside the Bible. In 1967, archaeologists working at Deir Alla in Jordan discovered an inscription from around the eighth century BC that speaks of "Balaam son of Beor" as a seer of the gods, written by people with no interest in supporting Israel's story.

Was Balaam a true prophet of God or a pagan diviner? Christians have understood him differently. Balak clearly thought of him as a diviner, a man who could be hired to bless or curse. The Old Testament never calls him a prophet of the Lord, and it associates him with the practice of divination (Joshua 13:22), which the Law strictly forbade. Some compare him to the medium at Endor whom Saul consulted, someone familiar with the God of Israel without truly belonging to Him.

On the other hand, the text says repeatedly that God spoke to Balaam. "God came to Balaam and asked, 'Who are these men with you?'" (Numbers 22:9). Balaam shows no surprise at receiving a word from God, as though he were used to it. And when Balak's second delegation offered him great wealth, he answered, "Even if Balak gave me all the silver and gold in his palace, I could not do anything great or small to go beyond the command of the LORD my God" (Numbers 22:18). He speaks of Israel's God personally, as "the LORD my God," though nothing in Balak's request required a word from Israel's God specifically. For those reasons, some believe Balaam was a real prophet who went badly astray, whose love of money clouded his judgment. We find ourselves leaning toward that second view, though with humility, since the evidence can be read both ways.

What is not in doubt is how the rest of Scripture remembers him. Numbers 31:16 reveals that it was Balaam's advice that led Israel into immorality and idolatry at Peor. Peter describes false

teachers who "follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer, who loved the wages of wickedness" (2 Peter 2:15). Jude warns against those who "have rushed for profit into Balaam's error" (Jude 11). And Jesus Himself warned the church at Pergamum about "the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin" (Revelation 2:14). Whatever Balaam's gifts, his heart was divided, and he is remembered as a warning.

That is a sobering thought. If Balaam truly received revelation from God, it did not keep him from going down a wicked path. Spiritual gifts and even true knowledge of God are not the same as a faithful heart. Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name...?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you'" (Matthew 7:22–23).

Accounts like this should make us uneasy, because there is so much in us that relates to Balaam. How many of us have come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior, yet still crave things that are fleeting? We become anxious about material things, nervous about how we look to others, and angry about things we have no business being angry about. We do not live as though eternity with God is just around the corner. We speak and sing about God's priority well enough, but anyone watching a typical week of our lives might paint a different picture. We pray that God will work in us what most glorifies Him, but our daily practice often tells another story. We can pray with the psalmist, "I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands" (Psalm 119:10), and confess with him, "I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word" (Psalm 119:25). "Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (Psalm 86:11).

When the first messengers came, God was clear: "Do not go with them. You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" (Numbers 22:12). God had already said to Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse" (Genesis 12:3). But when Balak sent more distinguished officials with a bigger offer, Balaam did not simply say no. He told them to stay the night "so that I can find out what else the LORD will tell me" (Numbers 22:19). He already had God's answer, but he hoped it might change.

"That night God came to Balaam and said, 'Since these men have come to summon you, go with them, but do only what I tell you'" (Numbers 22:20). So Balaam went. "But God was very angry when he went, and the angel of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him" (Numbers 22:22).

Does anyone else find this peculiar? God told him to go, and then was angry that he went. We saw something similar with the quail in chapter 11. The people complained, God gave them meat, and then He struck them while they were eating it. The explanation seems to be that God is sometimes angry about what He nonetheless permits. He permitted Balaam to go, but He was not pleased with him. He permitted the people to have meat, but He was not pleased with them either. Balaam was eager to go, just as the people were eager to eat, and both should have known better. Rather than seeking what would please God, each pursued his own desire. Theologians sometimes distinguish between God's "permissive will," what He allows, and His "revealed will," what He commands and approves. God permits many things in our lives that He does not approve. These incidents should teach us to humble ourselves before Him

and seek His honor above our own preferences, rather than looking for permission to do what we already want.

What follows is one of the most memorable scenes in the Bible. As Balaam rode along, his donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword, and turned off into a field. Balaam beat her. Then the angel stood in a narrow path between two vineyard walls, and the donkey pressed against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot. He beat her again. Finally the angel stood where there was no room to turn, and the donkey lay down under him. Balaam, furious, beat her a third time.

"Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, 'What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?'" (Numbers 22:28). And Balaam, apparently too angry to be astonished that his donkey was talking, answered, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now" (Numbers 22:29). The irony is delicious. The seer who was famous for his spiritual vision could not see what his donkey saw. And he wished for a sword to kill his donkey, while an angel with a sword stood ready to kill him.

"Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn" (Numbers 22:31). The angel told him, "I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me.... If the donkey had not turned away, I would certainly have killed you by now, but I would have spared it" (Numbers 22:32–33). The donkey had saved Balaam's life, and he had beaten her for it. Peter summarizes the scene with gentle humor: Balaam "was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—an animal without speech—who spoke with a human voice and restrained the

prophet's madness" (2 Peter 2:16). God can use anything, even a donkey, to speak His truth. And in the end, Balaam was not much different from the donkey: an instrument God used to accomplish His purpose, whether Balaam wanted to or not.

The angel allowed Balaam to continue, but with a firm limit: "Go with the men, but speak only what I tell you" (Numbers 22:35). When Balaam arrived, he told Balak, "I must speak only what God puts in my mouth" (Numbers 22:38). As we will see in the next chapter, Balak's plan to curse Israel was about to backfire spectacularly.

This story raises a question that believers have long wrestled with. How much of our lives is in our hands, and how much in God's? Balaam made his plans. Balak made his. But the outcome was decided by God. Proverbs says it three times over: "To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue" (Proverbs 16:1). "The LORD works out everything to its proper end" (Proverbs 16:4). "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

Can we take this too far? We pray, but whether our prayers are answered as we hope is up to God. We do good, but whether it bears fruit is His. We make careful plans for our work, our health, and our families, but their success is in His hands. Scripture holds both sides together without embarrassment: our choices are real and meaningful, and God's purposes stand behind and beneath them without canceling them out. "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed" (Ecclesiastes 11:6). A well-known Christian writer once observed that we go wrong when we focus on what happens to us rather than on

what we do, and when we become fixated on getting results. There is wisdom in that. Our responsibility is to make right plans and take right actions, faithfully and diligently, and then to leave the results with God rather than being anxious about them. That is not a way around the tension between God's sovereignty and our responsibility. It may be the most livable way of holding it.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Israel was defeated at Hormah when they went without God, and victorious at Hormah when they went with Him. What does this teach you about the importance of seeking God before you act?
2. The people said "There is no bread!" while eating manna every day. Are there good gifts from God in your life that you have become so used to that you no longer see them as gifts?
3. The bitten Israelites were saved simply by looking at the bronze snake. How does this picture help you explain salvation by faith in Christ to someone else?
4. The bronze snake later became an idol called Nehushtan. What good things, even religious things, are you in danger of treating as though they had power in themselves?
5. Balaam received words from God, yet his love of money led him astray. What "fleeting things" compete for your heart even though you know and love the Lord?
6. God permitted Balaam to go but was angry when he went. Are there times when you have looked for God's permission to do something you already wanted, rather than seeking

what would please Him? What would it look like to seek His honor above your preference?

Chapter Eleven

Numbers 23–25

Balak had hired the most famous seer of his day to curse Israel. Balaam had arrived, warned by an angel and a donkey that he could speak only what God put in his mouth. Now, on the heights overlooking Israel's camp, the contest begins. Three times Balak builds altars. Three times he offers sacrifices. Three times Balaam opens his mouth to speak, and three times blessing pours out instead of cursing. Then comes a fourth oracle that looks far into the future to a coming King. And then, in chapter 25, when curses have failed, the enemy tries a different strategy, and it nearly succeeds.

"Balaam said, 'Build me seven altars here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me'" (Numbers 23:1). Balak did as he was told, and Balaam went off to meet with God. When he returned, he spoke his first oracle: "How can I curse those whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce those whom the LORD has not denounced? From the rocky peaks I see them, from the heights I view them. I see a people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob or number even a fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!" (Numbers 23:8–10).

"A people who live apart." Israel was called to be distinct from the nations, set apart for God. Peter applies the same idea to the church, calling believers "a chosen people... God's special possession" and urging them "as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires" (1 Peter 2:9, 11). Jesus said of His disciples, "They are not of the world, even as I am not of it" (John

17:16). We are meant to live in this world as people who do not quite fit, as though we were made for somewhere else.

And then Balaam's startling prayer: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!" It is a beautiful prayer. But it is also one of the sharpest ironies in the Old Testament. Balaam did not die the death of the righteous. A few chapters later, we learn that he was killed among the Midianites (Numbers 31:8), and that it was his counsel that led Israel into the sin of chapter 25 (Numbers 31:16). The man who could see Israel's blessedness so clearly from the mountaintop did not choose the life that leads to the death he wished for. Balaam wanted the righteous ending without the righteous path.

Jesus walked the path. "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). He died the death of the righteous, and He knew His end: resurrection and glory at the Father's right hand. And through Him, that death and that end belong to all who follow Him. We can live our lives in the hands of God and die, when our time comes, the death of the upright, knowing that we will be glorified and made holy and righteous forever, like Jesus. How wonderful the future is for those who are in Christ!

Balak was furious. "What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies, but you have done nothing but bless them!" (Numbers 23:11). So he tried again. "Come with me to another place where you can see them; you will not see them all but only the outskirts of their camp. And from there, curse them for me" (Numbers 23:13). Perhaps, he thought, if Balaam could not see the whole vast camp, it would be easier to curse. Seven more altars, seven more bulls, seven more rams. And Balaam's

second oracle contains one of the greatest statements about God in all of Scripture:

"God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill? I have received a command to bless; he has blessed, and I cannot change it. No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them" (Numbers 23:19–21).

Even though these words came through the mouth of a man who may not have been a true prophet, Scripture presents them as God's truth, and they affirm what we should understand about God. He does not lie. He does not change His mind as a human being does. He does what He says. And He, not any king or seer, determines the destiny of His people.

Balak's strategy assumed that God was like a human patron, who might be persuaded to change his mind if you approached him from a different angle, offered more sacrifices, or caught him in a different mood. Balaam's oracle demolished that assumption. God's word does not become false because a king moves his altars to a new hilltop or increases the size of his offering. "There is no divination against Jacob, no evil omens against Israel. It will now be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'See what God has done!'" (Numbers 23:23).

This raises a question that puzzles many readers. If God does not change His mind, what do we make of passages that say He relented from a judgment He had announced, or that He regretted something He had done? The same chapter of 1 Samuel that says "the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35) also says that God "does not

lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind" (1 Samuel 15:29). The narrative places those statements side by side, so it clearly does not see them as contradictory.

Part of the answer is that Scripture often describes God in human terms so that we can understand Him. God is spirit (John 4:24), yet Scripture speaks of His arm, His hand, and His eyes. When God asked Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9), it was not because the Creator of the universe did not know where Adam was hiding. As Jesus told Nicodemus, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). God speaks to us in language we can grasp.

But that is not the whole answer, and we should not dismiss those passages as mere figures of speech. God Himself explains, through Jeremiah, that many of His announcements of judgment are conditional: "If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned" (Jeremiah 18:7–8). That is exactly what happened with Nineveh in the days of Jonah. When God relents in response to repentance, He is not changing His character or His purpose; He is acting consistently with His own stated principles. And the descriptions of God's grief over sin tell us something true about how deeply He opposes it, even if His knowledge and life are not limited like ours. Christians have explained these passages in different ways, but we must hold both truths: God is absolutely constant and faithful, and He truly responds to the people He has made.

Some passages are harder still. In 1 Kings 22, a prophet named Micaiah describes a vision in which God allows a lying spirit to deceive King Ahab's prophets as a judgment on Ahab. That scene raises difficult questions about God's sovereignty in judgment, and it cannot simply be explained away. But notice that Micaiah himself told Ahab exactly what was happening, and warned him plainly. God's revealed word through His true prophet was not false. Ahab had surrounded himself with prophets who told him what he wanted to hear, and his preference for flattery was part of his judgment.

We can only scratch the surface of these questions here. But it is worth encouraging every reader to search them out. Many Christians fall short in their understanding because they give up searching too soon. The same is often true of people of other faiths, and of skeptics. It is not always that they reject the truth, but that they have only part of it, not enough to reach a sound judgment. And this is a matter of eternal consequence. It deserves a lifelong pursuit. "Indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God" (Proverbs 2:3-5). Solomon, who wrote a whole book about the emptiness of every other pursuit, reached this conclusion: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Of course, diligence in searching also means comparing passages, admitting what is unresolved, and remaining humble. We should not assume that everyone who disagrees with us has simply stopped searching.

Balaam's second oracle also speaks to the way we pray. It is common to hear that God changes His will according to our

prayers. That idea can be comforting at first, because it seems to suggest that if we perform well enough, if we pray hard enough and show enough zeal, we will get what we believe is right. But Balaam tried three times to change God's mind by building altars in different places, as though God might be persuaded by a new location or a larger sacrifice. That seems absurd. Yet don't Christians sometimes think the same way? "It wouldn't have turned out this way if I had prayed harder, or given more money to the church, or never missed the early morning prayer meeting." We imagine that God's plan depends on the quality of our religious performance.

There is real freedom in letting that idea go. If every disappointment were evidence that we had not prayed intensely enough, every hardship would become an endless audit of our spiritual performance, and we would carry a burden Scripture never places on us. God's care for His children is not purchased by perfect attendance or the size of a contribution. We are called to obey Him, and He will accomplish the purpose of His will.

But the answer to manipulation is not prayer without specific requests. Jesus taught His disciples to ask for daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance in the very same prayer that says, "your will be done" (Matthew 6:10–13). In Gethsemane He prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Specific desire and genuine submission can live together. Scripture tells us that "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16), and invites us to present our requests to God with thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6). Our own conviction is that God is sovereign over all things, and that prayer is one of the means He has appointed to accomplish His purposes. Other

Christians explain the relationship between prayer and providence differently. But none of us should turn the biblical invitation to ask into a pretense.

We should also remember that Balaam was trying to curse a people God had blessed. A parent praying for a sick child, or a believer asking for work, is not doing what Balaam did. Tears, repeated requests, and honest lament can be expressions of dependence, not rebellion. The difference lies in whether we come to God as Lord, or come believing that our efforts obligate Him to give us what we want. So we pray honestly for what we desire, ask for wisdom about the next right step, and commit ourselves to obey Him even if His answer differs from what we hoped. "Your will be done" is not a phrase to silence our requests. It is the posture in which we make them.

Balak tried a third time, at the top of Peor. But this time something changed. "Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not resort to divination as at other times, but turned his face toward the wilderness. When Balaam looked out and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God came on him" (Numbers 24:1–2). And he spoke: "How beautiful are your tents, Jacob, your dwelling places, Israel!" (Numbers 24:5). He described Israel as gardens beside a river, as trees planted by the water, as a lion that no one dares to rouse. And he ended with words that echo God's promise to Abraham: "May those who bless you be blessed and those who curse you be cursed!" (Numbers 24:9; see Genesis 12:3).

Now Balak's anger burned. "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but you have blessed them these three times" (Numbers 24:10). He told Balaam to go home without his reward. Balak had been told from the beginning that Israel was

blessed, and yet he kept insisting on a curse, because he wanted to avoid defeat. Perhaps if he had embraced Israel rather than opposed them, things would have turned out very differently for Moab. And are we not sometimes like Balak? We pursue our desires even when they stand in direct opposition to the Lord's will, trying one approach and then another, hoping that somehow God will give way.

Why would God use a pagan seer, whose practice of divination He had forbidden, to bless His people? We cannot know all His reasons. But perhaps, since Balaam was famous among the nations, God was making a declaration to the surrounding peoples that He alone is the Almighty God of Israel, and that no hired curse could touch those He had chosen. God's blessing was already on His people whether Balaam cursed them or not. Centuries later, the prophet Micah would tell Israel to remember this episode as proof of God's faithfulness: "My people, remember what Balak king of Moab plotted and what Balaam son of Beor answered.... that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD" (Micah 6:5). No amount of persistence could overturn what God had decided to bless.

That is a great comfort for believers. Balaam tried to curse Israel three separate times, from three different vantage points, and each attempt failed. Paul makes the same point about God's people in Christ, running through an exhaustive list of threats and dismissing each one: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors

through him who loved us" (Romans 8:33–35, 37). We have an accuser who brings charges against us day and night. Like Israel in the wilderness, we fail every day. Our enemy schemes to destroy us. But no one and nothing can overturn God's faithfulness and love. Blessed be Jesus our Lord, the author and perfecter of our salvation!

Some readers wonder how God could tell Balaam to go and then be angry that he went, and they compare it with David's census, where 2 Samuel says that the Lord incited David to count Israel (2 Samuel 24:1), while 1 Chronicles says that Satan did (1 Chronicles 21:1). How are these resolved? In both cases, Scripture presents God's sovereign permission and a person's own culpable choice at work in the same event, without either cancelling the other. God permitted Balaam to go, but the angel said his path was "reckless" (Numbers 22:32). The permission was real, and so was Balaam's accountability for what his eagerness revealed about his heart. Peter says Balaam "loved the wages of wickedness" (2 Peter 2:15). The talking donkey exposed his stubborn madness. He should have been astonished by the miracle, but his determination blinded him to the obvious. Stubborn as a donkey, he lacked even a donkey's wisdom.

Before he went home, Balaam spoke one more oracle, and it is the most important of all. "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.... A ruler will come out of Jacob" (Numbers 24:17, 19).

A King would arise from Israel, far in the future, who would conquer Israel's enemies. This was partly fulfilled when David

defeated Moab and Edom (2 Samuel 8:2, 14). But the prophecy reaches beyond David. The image of the star from Jacob became one of the great messianic hopes of Israel. In the second century AD, the leader of a Jewish revolt against Rome took the name Bar Kokhba, "son of the star," claiming to be its fulfillment. His claim failed. But a century earlier, wise men from the east had come to Jerusalem asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2). And at the very end of the Bible, Jesus says, "I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star" (Revelation 22:16). A prophecy spoken by a foreign seer-for-hire, over enemy territory, was still echoing centuries later at the birth it had pointed toward all along.

Balaam's last words were a cry: "Alas! Who can live when God does this?" (Numbers 24:23). In context, this seems to be a lament about the conflicts and judgments his oracle had just described, rather than a statement about eternal destiny. But it is a fitting response to seeing even a glimpse of God's plans. When God acts, who can stand against Him?

Then comes chapter 25, and it is one of the most tragic chapters in the book. Balak had failed to defeat Israel militarily. Balaam had failed to curse them supernaturally. So a different strategy was tried, and we learn later that it was Balaam's own idea (Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14). If Israel could not be cursed from outside, perhaps they could be drawn into sin from within, and bring God's judgment on themselves.

"While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked

themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them" (Numbers 25:1–3).

Notice the sequence. First came sexual enticement, then an invitation to a religious feast, then eating the sacrifices, and finally bowing down to other gods. The physical fall led to a spiritual fall. This was the first recorded time that Israel was led astray by intermingling with the surrounding peoples, and sadly, it was only the beginning. Centuries later, Solomon's heart was turned away by the same mechanism: "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). It was not a one-time weakness of the wilderness generation, but a recurring danger that Israel's leaders failed again and again to guard against.

What Balaam's curses could not do, Israel's own sin did. A plague broke out, and twenty-four thousand Israelites died (Numbers 25:9) without a single arrow being fired by Moab or Midian. (Paul, recalling this event, says that "in one day twenty-three thousand of them died" [1 Corinthians 10:8]; he may be referring to those who died on a single day of the plague.) They died because they sinned against God. God was not bound to Israel in a way that obligated Him to overlook their sin. Rather, their lives were bound to Him. His unconditional covenant with Abraham could have continued even through a single faithful Israelite. Remember that God had offered to make Moses the father of a new nation. Moses declined, but the possibility was real. We must never imagine that God is beholden to us. We are beholden to Him. Like Israel of old, we cling not to our own righteousness but to His promises.

God commanded that the leaders who had joined in the worship of Baal be put to death publicly, so that His fierce anger

would turn away from Israel (Numbers 25:4–5). The judges and the people gathered at the entrance to the tent of meeting, weeping. And in that solemn moment, "an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (Numbers 25:6). We later learn that the man, Zimri, was a leader of a Simeonite family, and the woman, Kozbi, was the daughter of a Midianite tribal chief (Numbers 25:14–15). This was not a private sin. It was an open, flagrant act of defiance, in full view of the grieving assembly, while the plague was still raging.

"When Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, saw this, he left the assembly, took a spear in his hand and followed the Israelite into the tent. He drove the spear into both of them.... Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped" (Numbers 25:7–8).

God commended Phinehas: "Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites" (Numbers 25:11–13). The psalmist later wrote, "But Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was checked. This was credited to him as righteousness for endless generations to come" (Psalm 106:30–31), using the same language Genesis used of Abraham's faith (Genesis 15:6). Because of one man's zeal for God's honor, the whole nation was spared further wrath.

This is one of the passages readers find hardest to sit with, and we should not smooth over the difficulty. Understanding it requires its context. It was not about interethnic marriage as such; Moses himself had married a Midianite. It was about a deliberate campaign to lead Israel into the worship of Baal, at a moment when a plague was killing thousands, in a covenant community under God's direct government. And God Himself had just commanded the execution of the leaders involved.

At the same time, several things must be said clearly. Phinehas is commended for his zeal in that specific moment; he is not set up as a pattern for others to follow. Scripture elsewhere treats zeal-driven violence with real caution. Jacob cursed the violent zeal of Simeon and Levi (Genesis 49:5–7). When James and John wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village, Jesus "turned and rebuked them" (Luke 9:55). Paul, who had once been zealous enough to persecute the church, later described that zeal as ignorance for which he needed mercy: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief" (1 Timothy 1:13). He wrote of his fellow Jews that "they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge" (Romans 10:2). And the New Testament is explicit that the church does not wield the sword for religious purposes. Our weapons are not the weapons of the world, vengeance belongs to God, and Christ's standing command is to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us.

This needs to be said because the story of Phinehas has, sadly, been invoked through history, including in modern times, by people seeking to justify religious violence. The narrative describes what God commanded within a unique covenant

order at a unique moment. It does not authorize any believer today to act on private zeal. Scripture's own direction runs firmly the other way.

And it points us to Someone greater. The disciples remembered the words of the psalm when they saw Jesus cleanse the temple: "Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17). Phinehas's zeal consumed the sinners. Jesus' zeal consumed Himself. One man's zealous act stopped a plague and turned away God's wrath from Israel for a time. One Man's perfect righteousness and sacrificial death turned away God's wrath from all who believe in Him, forever. It is because of Christ's righteousness, not our own, that we are spared.

That should make us deeply humble. It is easy to read Numbers and assume we would have been among the faithful few. But if we had lived in Noah's day, could we really say we would have been like Noah and not like the multitudes who perished? Abraham himself was called out of idolatry. Could we say we would have trusted God like Joshua and Caleb, when the rest of Israel sided with the ten spies? Would we have stood apart at Peor? We have too high a view of ourselves.

One husband and wife who keep a daily journal together came across a question one day: "What is a risk you don't mind taking?" The husband wrote, "To believe and follow the Bible with all my heart." His wife asked, "How is that a risk?" He answered, "I don't know everything. There's a place for faith." Paul tells us to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). There is room in that "trembling" for honest awareness of our weakness and the fragility of our own faith. We are saved, and we believe it, and yet we tremble before a holy God who will judge the world.

This is one reason we hold firmly to the conviction that God's choice of His people rests on His grace and not on anything in them. If our faith were truly our own, originating in us, we would have little confidence in its integrity. Other Christians understand the relationship between God's grace and human choice differently, and they too insist that no one can boast. But whatever our view, the conclusion is the same: we can boast of nothing concerning our salvation. "But by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Jesus is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:2), from beginning to end. And Paul's call to work out our salvation with fear and trembling is immediately followed by its ground of assurance: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). We are wholly saved by His grace.

The chapter ends with God's command to treat the Midianites as enemies, "because they treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident" (Numbers 25:18). That judgment will be carried out in chapter 31. What Balaam could not accomplish by cursing, he attempted through temptation, and that remains a sobering picture of how spiritual attack often works. Our enemy rarely tries to curse us outright. He invites us to a feast.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Balaam prayed, "Let me die the death of the righteous," but did not choose the life that leads there. Is there an area of your life where you want God's blessing without walking His path?
2. "God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind." How does God's faithfulness to

His word comfort you? How do you reconcile it with passages where God relents in response to repentance?

3. Balaam kept moving the altars, hoping to change God's mind. Have you ever thought that God's will depended on how hard you prayed or how much you gave? How can you pray specifically and honestly while still trusting God's sovereign will?
4. Balaam tried to curse Israel three times and could not. Read Romans 8:31–39. What accusations or fears most threaten your confidence in God's love, and how does this passage answer them?
5. At Peor, sexual enticement led to idolatry. Where do you see a similar progression from compromise in one area to spiritual unfaithfulness in another? What guards can you put in place?
6. Phinehas's zeal consumed the sinners; Jesus' zeal consumed Himself. How does Christ's sacrifice both humble you and give you assurance, especially when you consider that you might not have stood with the faithful few?

Chapter Twelve

Numbers 26–27

The plague at Peor had ended. The old generation was gone. And so, nearly forty years after the first census at Sinai, God commanded Moses and Eleazar to count the people again: "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by families—all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel" (Numbers 26:2). This second census, taken "on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho" (Numbers 26:3), is the reason the book is called Numbers in English. It marks the end of the wilderness story and the beginning of a new one. A new generation stands at the edge of the Promised Land.

The census follows the same pattern as the first, tribe by tribe, but this time it names the clans within each tribe. And when the counting was done, "The total number of the men of Israel was 601,730" (Numbers 26:51). In chapter 1 the total had been 603,550. After nearly forty years in the wilderness, after an entire generation had died, after plagues and judgments and battles, the nation was almost exactly the same size as when it began.

That is a remarkable testimony to God's faithfulness. More than two million people had wandered in a harsh and barren land. Thousands had died in judgment for their rebellion. They had fought battles against Sihon and Og. And yet the Lord had preserved them, and the next generation had grown up to take the place of the last. God's zeal for keeping His covenant with Abraham is displayed here on a grand scale. It would have been one thing to bless an untested, prosperous people. It is another to keep a nation intact through four decades of crisis, much of it

self-inflicted. We have nothing to boast about in ourselves. But we can be strengthened in our faith, fully persuaded that God has the power to accomplish what He has promised us in Jesus and sealed by the Holy Spirit.

Yet while the total barely changed, individual tribes changed dramatically. Manasseh grew by 20,500, from 32,200 to 52,700. Issachar, Asher, and Benjamin grew substantially. Ephraim, Naphtali, and Reuben declined. But one tribe stands out above all the others. Simeon fell from 59,300 in the first census (Numbers 1:23) to just 22,200 in the second (Numbers 26:14), a decline of nearly two-thirds. What happened to the tribe of Simeon?

The text does not say directly, but the context suggests an answer. In the chapter just before, the plague at Peor killed 24,000 people, and the man who brought the Midianite woman into the camp in open defiance was "Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family" (Numbers 25:14). Scripture does not tell us that all who died in the plague were Simeonites, but it seems likely that many were. The census numbers may be Scripture's quiet confirmation of how heavily one tribe bore the consequences of that sin.

There is another clue. Genesis and Exodus list six sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jakin, Zohar, and Shaul (Genesis 46:10; Exodus 6:15). But the census of Numbers 26 names only five Simeonite clans, and Ohad is missing (Numbers 26:12–14). The later genealogy in 1 Chronicles also omits him (1 Chronicles 4:24). An entire clan appears to have vanished during the wilderness years. Could Zimri have led the clan of Ohad? It is possible, but we can only speculate.

The story of Simeon's decline continues beyond Numbers. When Moses blessed the tribes before his death, Simeon was not mentioned at all (Deuteronomy 33). When the land was divided, "Their inheritance lay within the territory of Judah" (Joshua 19:1), because Judah's portion was larger than it needed. Simeon was gradually absorbed into Judah. This traces back to Jacob's deathbed words about Simeon and Levi, whose violence at Shechem he condemned: "I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7).

It is worth noticing how differently that same word played out for the two brothers. Levi was also scattered, but its scattering became a blessing. The Levites were spread through every tribe's territory as priests and servants of the sanctuary, positioned to teach and serve the whole nation. Simeon's scattering simply diminished the tribe, with no priestly calling to redeem it. The same judgment, spoken in one breath over two brothers guilty of the same sin, produced very different outcomes, depending in part on what each tribe did in the years that followed. And yet God did not wipe out Simeon. The tribe is still named among the sealed servants of God in Revelation: "from the tribe of Simeon 12,000" (Revelation 7:7). His faithfulness outlasted their failure.

Simeon's story teaches us something about leadership. Each of us is responsible for our own actions. But a leader can set a whole group on a path toward destruction. Zimri's flagrant sin may have cost his clan its very existence. Even if we are not the heads of clans, we are leaders in our own families, and our children follow our example whether we intend them to or not. We need to take that responsibility seriously.

Likewise, a good leader can inspire others toward faithfulness, sometimes even more powerfully in death than in life. Some years ago, a government minister in Pakistan, the only Christian in his country's cabinet, was shot dead in broad daylight for opposing laws that were being used to persecute religious minorities. Months earlier, despite repeated death threats, he had said publicly that he was a follower of Jesus Christ and was willing to die for that cause. Many around the world had never heard of him while he was alive, but after his death his testimony as a follower of the cross spread far beyond his own country. We should pray regularly for the persecuted church, and for believers who face life-and-death choices because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

In the middle of the census comes a brief reminder we noted earlier: "The line of Korah, however, did not die out" (Numbers 26:11). And a single, curious line about the tribe of Asher: "(Asher had a daughter named Serah.)" (Numbers 26:46). Serah is named three times in Scripture, each time in a genealogy that otherwise lists only sons (Genesis 46:17; Numbers 26:46; 1 Chronicles 7:30). Why is she singled out? Scripture does not say. Some older commentators, drawing on Jewish tradition, suggested that she was remarkable for her faith or wisdom, or that she was an heiress who received her family's inheritance in the absence of sons. Jewish legend went much further, imagining her living an extraordinarily long life. Scripture itself says nothing of the sort, and many scholars think the Numbers reference simply names a clan descended from her. But her quiet appearance is a reminder that careful reading pays attention to small details. Even a brief mention may carry

weight, and in the very next chapter, we will meet five women whose names changed Israel's law.

The census had a practical purpose: dividing the land. "The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one.... Be sure that the land is distributed by lot" (Numbers 26:53–55). The size of each tribe's territory would depend on its numbers, but the location would be determined by lot, which meant God Himself would decide where each tribe lived.

Why did this strip of land matter so much? It was, after all, only a small territory at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. But Canaan was never merely real estate. It was the fulfillment of a promise God had made to Abraham: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" (Genesis 15:18). The Euphrates is one of the rivers that Genesis describes flowing out of Eden (Genesis 2:14). The Promised Land was meant to be a place where God's people could live in His presence, under His protection and provision, something like a restored Eden. The psalmist calls it God's "rest" (Psalm 95:11). And Israel's repeated disobedience would later lead to their literal eviction from it.

We believe God's promise of this land to Abraham's descendants was real and remains in force, and that He will yet fulfill it. At the same time, the New Testament shows us that Canaan also pointed beyond itself. Hebrews argues that Joshua's conquest did not deliver the final rest God had in mind: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:8–9). Christians, who are children of

Abraham by faith, receive no inheritance in Canaan. But we receive what Canaan pictured: rest from the burden of sin and fear, and an eternal inheritance with God. Jesus extends that invitation to everyone: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The Levites, as before, were counted separately: "All the male Levites a month old or more numbered 23,000. They were not counted along with the other Israelites because they received no inheritance among them" (Numbers 26:62). Their inheritance was the Lord.

Some readers notice that the census gives twelve tribal inheritances, plus Levi, and wonder whether Israel really had thirteen tribes. In one sense, yes: Joseph's descendants became two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, for purposes of inheritance, while Levi received no territory. But Scripture consistently speaks of "the twelve tribes of Israel" (Genesis 49:28; Matthew 19:28; James 1:1), and the gates of the new Jerusalem bear "the names of the twelve tribes of Israel" (Revelation 21:12). Different biblical lists reach twelve in different ways. Numbers counts Ephraim and Manasseh and leaves out Levi. Revelation 7 includes Levi and Joseph but leaves out Dan. This flexibility suggests that the number twelve itself carried theological significance, representing the completeness of God's people, and that Scripture was less concerned with one fixed roster than with what the number meant.

The chapter closes with a sentence that fulfills a prophecy spoken almost forty years earlier: "Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai. For the LORD had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and

not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun" (Numbers 26:64–65).

God spoke, and it came to pass. That is a recurring theme of the whole Bible. God had said at Kadesh, "In this wilderness your bodies will fall... except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun" (Numbers 14:29–30). And now it was done. God's Word comes to pass without fail, whether in judgment or in blessing. Isaiah put it beautifully: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10–11).

Israel placed its hope on God's Word, on the covenant promises He had made. Because His Word was sure, their hope was sure. And notice the context of Isaiah's words. They come in a chapter that begins with an invitation: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1). The Word that cannot fail is also the gracious summons that calls the thirsty to come. Its certainty is exactly what gives us reason to come, listen, and seek the Lord.

The same Word that was sure in judgment and in promise is sure in bringing people to faith. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Romans 10:17). Paul's point in that passage is the necessity of preaching: "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14). Faith comes when the message of Christ is proclaimed and heard.

But how does anyone come to believe it? Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them" (John 6:44), and "no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them" (John 6:65). Our conviction is that God does more than make salvation available. He opens ears to hear and hearts to believe, and what He begins He will surely finish: "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). That gives believers a deep and steady assurance. Our salvation does not rest on the firmness of our own will, but on the faithfulness of God's Word.

We should say, in fairness, that many Christians who give a larger place to human freedom also ground their assurance in Christ's faithfulness and grace, not in confidence in their own willpower. They explain the relationship between God's grace and human response differently, but they too confess complete dependence on God. And whatever our theology, the practical result should be the same. Confidence in God's saving work should make us more eager to proclaim the gospel, not less, since God has chosen to save through the preaching of His Word. We need not uncover God's hidden purposes before coming to Christ. The gospel tells us plainly whom to trust.

Chapter 27 opens with one of the most delightful episodes in the book. Five sisters, "Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah" (Numbers 27:1), from the tribe of Manasseh, had a problem. Their father, Zelophehad, had died in the wilderness and left no sons. Under the customs of the time, inheritance passed through sons. That meant their father's name and portion would disappear from Israel.

So these women did something remarkable. "They came forward and stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the leaders

and the whole assembly at the entrance to the tent of meeting and said, 'Our father died in the wilderness. He was not among Korah's followers, who banded together against the LORD, but he died for his own sin and left no sons. Why should our father's name disappear from his clan because he had no son? Give us property among our father's relatives'" (Numbers 27:2-4).

Think of the courage this took. Five unmarried women stood before the entire leadership of Israel at the entrance of the tent of meeting and made a legal claim. They were careful to note that their father had not been part of Korah's rebellion, which might have forfeited his inheritance. He had died, like the rest of his generation, for his own sin. And they asked for what was just.

Notice, too, their faith. They were asking for land that Israel did not yet possess. Canaan was still across the Jordan, filled with fortified cities and powerful peoples. The previous generation had refused to believe God would give them the land. These five women took it for granted that He would, and they wanted to make sure their family received its share. That is exactly the kind of faith their fathers had lacked.

Moses did not presume to decide the case himself. "So Moses brought their case before the LORD" (Numbers 27:5). And God's answer was immediate and clear: "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them property as an inheritance among their father's relatives and give their father's inheritance to them" (Numbers 27:7). God then established a general law: "If a man dies and leaves no son, give his inheritance to his daughter" (Numbers 27:8), and if there was no daughter, to his brothers, and so on to the nearest relative. "This is to have the force of law for the Israelites" (Numbers 27:11).

In a culture where inheritance ran through sons, that ruling protected women from being left destitute, and it came from God Himself. It is worth remembering this when people claim that the Bible treats women as property. The daughters of Zelophehad brought their case boldly, and God declared that they were right. We will see their story again at the very end of the book.

Then comes a hard moment for Moses. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Go up this mountain in the Abarim Range and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was, for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes'" (Numbers 27:12–14).

How painful this must have been for Moses. He had led the people for forty years. He had borne their grumbling and complaining. He had interceded for them again and again when they provoked God's wrath. At times he seemed to prefer death to the burden he carried. And now, standing on the threshold of the reward that would make all his labor worthwhile, the Promised Land, the fruit of the land, rest from wandering, a homeland for Israel, he would only see it from a distance. All because of one moment at Meribah.

Deuteronomy shows us how deeply this grieved Moses. He pleaded with God: "Sovereign LORD, you have begun to show to your servant your greatness and your strong hand.... Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan" (Deuteronomy 3:24–25). But God would not relent: "'That is enough,' the LORD said. 'Do not speak to me anymore about this matter'" (Deuteronomy 3:26). Moses repeatedly brought up the subject

with the people, sometimes even blaming them: "Because of you the LORD became angry with me also" (Deuteronomy 1:37). Moses was a great man of faith, but he was human, and this disappointment clearly weighed on him.

Yet we know that this was not the end of Moses' story. He was disciplined for his sin, but his salvation was not affected. What a wonderful thing to know: God may discipline us for our sins without casting us away. Hallelujah!

The wilderness generation as a whole is another matter, and Scripture uses their story as a solemn warning. Hebrews quotes God's oath, "They shall never enter my rest," and adds, "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief" (Hebrews 3:11, 19). The writer applies this to the eternal rest that remains for God's people, urging his readers not to follow their example. We should take that warning seriously. At the same time, we should be careful about pronouncing on the eternal destiny of every individual who died in the wilderness. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam also died there, and we know that Moses belongs to God. The warning is meant for us: do not harden your hearts in unbelief.

Psalm 90 is traditionally attributed to Moses. If that attribution is right, it was written by a man who watched an entire generation die before reaching the land he had spent his life walking toward, and who faced his own limit at its very edge. And it contains one of the Bible's clearest prayers about making peace with our mortality: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

What did Moses do when he heard that he would die? He did not argue, at least not here. He thought about the people. "May the LORD, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint

someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the LORD's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27:16–17). His first concern was not his own disappointment but the welfare of the people he had led for forty years, the same people who had so often made his life miserable. That is the heart of a true shepherd.

God answered: "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him" (Numbers 27:18). Joshua was to stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole assembly, and Moses was to commission him publicly. "Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him" (Numbers 27:20). Unlike Moses, who spoke with God face to face, Joshua would seek God's will through Eleazar the priest and the Urim (Numbers 27:21). And "Moses did as the LORD commanded him.... Then he laid his hands on him and commissioned him, as the LORD instructed through Moses" (Numbers 27:22–23).

It is striking that the man God chose to lead Israel into the Promised Land was named Joshua, a name meaning "The LORD saves." In Greek it is the same name as Jesus. Centuries later, Jesus looked at the crowds, "and he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36), using the very words Moses had prayed. Moses could bring the people to the edge of the land, but he could not bring them in. That task fell to Joshua. The Law can bring us to the border, but it cannot bring us into God's rest. Only Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11), can do that.

We should also ask a deeper question. Was the Promised Land really the great reward God intended for Moses and for Israel? Before God ever promised Abraham the land, He promised him something greater: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1). The Lord Himself was Abraham's reward. He was Moses' reward. He was Israel's reward. That is why God taught them that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:3).

The saints of Scripture learned this lesson. "LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup" (Psalm 16:5). "The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him" (Lamentations 3:24). "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:25–26). "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8).

One modern pastor has asked a searching question. If you could have heaven with no sickness, with all your friends, all the food and leisure and beauty you ever enjoyed, and no conflict or disaster, but Christ were not there, would you be satisfied? The gospel is not merely a way to get people to heaven. It is a way to bring people to God, removing everything that stands between us and everlasting joy in Him. And as we behold the glory of Christ, we are changed: "we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

God confirmed this in the way Moses' story actually ended. He did not leave Moses with only a distant glimpse. He took him

up Mount Nebo and showed him "the whole land" (Deuteronomy 34:1). Then, remarkably, God Himself buried him (Deuteronomy 34:6). Deuteronomy's final tribute honors him as the prophet "whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10). And centuries later, Moses did stand in the Promised Land, on the Mount of Transfiguration, speaking with Jesus about the departure He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem (Luke 9:30–31). Moses entered the land at last, in the presence of the One who had always been his true reward.

Asaph, after considering all the good that life offers and all God's blessings, concluded, "But as for me, it is good to be near God" (Psalm 73:28). Let us learn to enjoy God above all His gifts. May Christ be our highest delight.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. After forty years of wandering, judgment, and war, Israel's population was almost exactly what it had been at Sinai. What does this teach you about God's faithfulness to His promises, even through seasons of discipline?
2. The tribe of Simeon may have suffered disproportionately because of one leader's flagrant sin. What kind of example are you setting for those who follow you, whether in your family, church, or workplace?
3. The daughters of Zelophehad claimed an inheritance in a land Israel had not yet conquered. Where is God calling you to act in faith on promises you cannot yet see fulfilled?
4. God declared, "What Zelophehad's daughters are saying is right." How does this passage challenge the claim that the Bible treats women as having no rights or voice?

5. When Moses learned he would not enter the land, his first concern was that the people would have a shepherd. How do you respond to personal disappointment? Does it turn you inward or outward?
6. "I am your shield, your very great reward." If you could have every blessing of heaven but Christ were not there, would you be satisfied? What does your honest answer reveal about your heart?

Chapter Thirteen

Numbers 28–30

The new generation had been counted. Joshua had been commissioned. Israel was camped on the plains of Moab, ready to cross the Jordan. And at this moment, God paused to give His people a calendar of worship and a set of laws about vows. It may seem an odd time for such regulations. But God was preparing a people who had grown up in the wilderness to live in the land, and the first thing they needed to know was how to worship Him there, day by day, week by week, and year by year.

Chapter 28 begins, "Give this command to the Israelites and say to them: 'Make sure that you present to me at the appointed time my food offerings, as an aroma pleasing to me'" (Numbers 28:2). Then it sets out the offerings for every sacred occasion in Israel's year.

It starts with every day. "This is the food offering you are to present to the LORD: two lambs a year old without defect, as a regular burnt offering each day. Offer one lamb in the morning and the other at twilight" (Numbers 28:3–4). Every morning and every evening, without exception, a lamb was offered on the altar, along with grain and a drink offering. This was "the regular burnt offering instituted at Mount Sinai as a pleasing aroma" (Numbers 28:6). Every other offering in these chapters was added on top of it.

On the Sabbath, two more lambs were offered (Numbers 28:9–10). At the beginning of each month, two bulls, a ram, seven lambs, and a goat (Numbers 28:11–15). Then the chapters move through the festivals we studied in Leviticus 23: Passover and the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks, the

Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Festival of Tabernacles. Leviticus described the festivals themselves; Numbers specifies the offerings that accompanied each one.

The Festival of Tabernacles required the most. On its first day, Israel offered thirteen bulls, two rams, and fourteen lambs, along with a goat for a sin offering (Numbers 29:12–16). On each following day, the number of bulls decreased by one, until the seventh day, when seven bulls were offered (Numbers 29:32). Altogether, seventy bulls were sacrificed during the festival. Later Jewish tradition connected those seventy bulls with the seventy nations listed in Genesis 10, as though Israel were offering sacrifices on behalf of the whole world. Scripture does not say so, but it is a striking thought, given that the prophets foresaw the nations one day coming to Jerusalem to celebrate this very festival (Zechariah 14:16).

The chapter closes by reminding Israel that these were the required public offerings, "In addition to what you vow and your freewill offerings" (Numbers 29:39). Individual Israelites would bring their own offerings as well: sin offerings and guilt offerings when they had done wrong, fellowship offerings in gratitude, and offerings to fulfill vows.

Some readers wonder how many sacrifices an ordinary Israelite would have offered in a year. It is hard to say, because much depended on each person's circumstances. Many offerings were brought in response to specific sins, whether unintentional or deliberate. Others were freewill offerings of thanksgiving. But underneath all the personal offerings ran a constant baseline: two lambs every day, 730 lambs a year, plus the additional offerings of the Sabbaths, New Moons, and festivals. If we add them up, the public offerings alone came to

more than a thousand animals every year, before a single individual brought an offering of his own.

That relentless repetition was itself a kind of message. Hebrews says, "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 10:11–12). Notice the contrast between standing and sitting. There was no chair in the tabernacle. The priests' work was never finished. Morning and evening, year after year, the lambs kept dying, and sin was never finally dealt with. But Christ offered one sacrifice, once for all, and then He sat down, because His work was done. The sheer volume of blood in Numbers 28 and 29 is not incidental to that argument. It is the evidence for it.

As we saw in Leviticus, the festivals themselves also point to Christ. He was crucified at Passover as "our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7), rose from the dead on the day of firstfruits as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20), and poured out His Spirit at Pentecost. And many see the autumn festivals as pointing forward to events still to come.

Should Christians celebrate these festivals today? Some believers have asked, "Why not?" Jesus and His disciples observed them. He attended the Festival of Tabernacles (John 7), celebrated Passover with His disciples (Luke 22), and was in Jerusalem for the Festival of Dedication (John 10:22). The early church received the Spirit at Pentecost. And the themes of the festivals, repentance, thanksgiving for God's provision, and remembering His redemption, are certainly relevant to us. There is something valuable about gathering to remember

corporately all that God has done, both before Christ and through Christ.

Our view is that Christians are free to observe these days, as long as it is understood that they are not required of us. Paul is clear: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16–17). A believer who chooses to celebrate them is free to do so, and so is one who does not, and neither should judge the other (Romans 14:5–6).

Anyone who does choose to celebrate them should recognize that they would have to be modified. Jewish communities today celebrate the festivals without the animal sacrifices associated with them, since the temple no longer stands. Christians do not offer those sacrifices for a deeper reason: the shadow has been replaced by the reality, which is Christ. And Christ has given us His own memorial, the Lord's Supper, in which we remember His death until He comes. It is also worth knowing what the festivals meant in their original setting, much of which was tied specifically to Israel's life in the land under the old covenant.

These chapters open with a phrase that appears again and again: "an aroma pleasing to me." Israel's offerings rose up to God like a fragrance He delighted in. What does it mean for worship to please God?

The New Testament gives us a glimpse of heavenly worship in which the elders fall down before God's throne and lay their crowns before Him, saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things" (Revelation 4:11). The common Greek word for worship in the

New Testament carries the idea of bowing down before someone in reverence. Worship is an encounter with God that bows the heart before Him.

For centuries, Israel worshiped at the tabernacle and then the temple. Some worshiped with real substance; others went through the forms. And over time many came to depend on the place itself, as though worship could happen only there. Jesus changed that. He told the Samaritan woman, "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth.... God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:21, 23–24). He spoke of His own body as the temple that would be destroyed and raised in three days (John 2:19–21). Worship would no longer center on a place but on a Person. Through Christ, and by His Spirit, God's people can approach God directly, wherever they are. The church itself is being "built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22).

And the New Testament takes up the image of a pleasing aroma. Christ "gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). And through us, God spreads the fragrance of Christ in the world: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing" (2 Corinthians 2:14–15). Our worship, not only on Sunday but in daily life, rises to God as a fragrance. We might ask ourselves,

if honoring God produces such a sweet aroma, what must our sin or our indifference smell like to Him?

Paul adds a contrast: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit" (2 Corinthians 2:17). There is an old Jewish story about a traveling peddler who came into a town calling out that he had a potion that would give long life. A crowd gathered. A learned rabbi, amused, invited the peddler to sell some to him. The peddler opened a book of Psalms and read aloud, "Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies" (Psalm 34:12-13). The rabbi, who had read that psalm all his life, was stunned. He realized he had never truly grasped what it meant until he heard it fresh from someone else. God's Word is not a commodity to be sold. It is a costly gift to be received and given away, and sometimes we need to hear familiar words anew to recognize their power.

Worship also requires commitment. In any relationship, whether a marriage or our relationship with God, true intimacy cannot be sustained without real commitment, and real commitment deepens intimacy. A couple's commitment years into their marriage should be no less than it was on their wedding day. So it is with the Lord. The Holy Spirit is committed to our pursuit of God, and He calls us to stay committed as well.

Sometimes, though, our spiritual momentum grinds to a halt. In a long bicycle race, when a rider falls, someone often helps him back up and gives him a push to get going again. We need that kind of push too. If we look only to human methods for renewal, the boost will be small and short-lived. What we most need is God's own presence, through His Spirit, experienced in genuine Christian community: prayer, encouragement, and

worship among fellow believers. That is one reason Scripture tells us not to give up "meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:25).

Israel's offerings also remind us that worship is costly. When David was offered a threshing floor and oxen for sacrifice free of charge, he refused: "I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24). An offering that costs us nothing means little. At the first Passover, each family was to choose a lamb on the tenth day of the month and keep it until the fourteenth (Exodus 12:3–6). It is not hard to imagine children in the household growing attached to the lamb during those days, and feeling real sorrow when it was killed. Whether or not that was part of God's purpose, it would have taught them something true: sin is costly, and its cost falls on the innocent.

Worship, then, is not passive. It means making the Lord the center of our lives, coming to Him not only to receive blessing but to give Him glory. Under the new covenant, we no longer bring lambs and bulls. But we are called to offer ourselves: "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1). "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name" (Hebrews 13:15). And every believer shares in the priestly role once given to Aaron's family: to draw near to God, to offer spiritual sacrifices, and to bless others in His name. We are "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), within our families and within the body of Christ.

Chapter 30 turns to vows. "When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must

not break his word but must do everything he said" (Numbers 30:2). A vow made to God was binding. We saw at the end of Leviticus that no one had to make a vow, but once made, it had to be kept.

Scripture records several famous vows. The first is Jacob's at Bethel, when he promised that if God would watch over him and bring him safely home, "then the LORD will be my God," and he would give God a tenth of everything (Genesis 28:20–22). Numbers 6 described the Nazirite vow. Jephthah made a rash vow before battle, promising to offer as a burnt offering whatever came out of his house to meet him when he returned victorious, and his only daughter came out to greet him (Judges 11:30–39). Interpreters debate whether she was actually sacrificed or dedicated to lifelong service and celibacy, since the text emphasizes her mourning her virginity. Either way, the story is a sobering warning about careless promises. And Hannah vowed that if God gave her a son, "I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life" (1 Samuel 1:11), and she kept her word.

The rest of Numbers 30 deals with vows made by women, and it contains provisions that surprise many readers. "When a young woman still living in her father's household makes a vow to the LORD or obligates herself by a pledge and her father hears about her vow or pledge but says nothing to her, then all her vows and every pledge by which she obligated herself will stand. But if her father forbids her when he hears about it, none of her vows or the pledges by which she obligated herself will stand; the LORD will release her because her father has forbidden her" (Numbers 30:3–5). The same was true of a married woman and her husband (Numbers 30:6–8, 10–15). But "Any vow or

obligation taken by a widow or divorced woman will be binding on her" (Numbers 30:9).

How could a man nullify a vow made to God? Some readers find this hard to believe. Elsewhere Scripture treats vows as absolutely binding once spoken. Many interpreters believe this provision was largely practical. In the ancient household, a young unmarried woman or a wife often did not control the household's resources. A vow might involve a costly offering, a fast, or a dedication that would affect the whole family. This law kept an entire household from being bound to a financial or practical obligation without the knowledge and consent of the one responsible for it. The widow and the divorced woman, who managed their own affairs, were bound by their own vows. And notice that God Himself released the woman whose vow was overruled: "the LORD will release her." She was not held guilty.

Hannah's story offers an example. When she wanted to keep Samuel at home until he was weaned before bringing him to the tabernacle, her husband Elkanah said, "Do what seems best to you.... only may the LORD make good his word" (1 Samuel 1:23). He confirmed her vow and supported her in keeping it.

The chapter includes a significant detail about the husband's responsibility. If he heard of his wife's vow and said nothing, his silence confirmed it. "If, however, he nullifies them some time after he hears about them, then he must bear the consequences of her wrongdoing" (Numbers 30:15). A husband could not remain silent, allow his wife to count on his consent, and then later force her to break her vow without accepting responsibility for it. His authority came with accountability. If his decision caused the breach, he, not she, bore the guilt.

Christians hold differing views on headship and submission in marriage, and serious readers of Scripture land in different places. Some emphasize a husband's leadership and a wife's submission, as Paul describes in Ephesians 5:22–24. Others emphasize the call to mutual submission in the verse just before: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21). This chapter addresses a narrow legal matter in ancient Israel's household economy, not every question about marital decision-making. But whatever view we hold, the principle of Numbers 30 is clear: authority in a household carries responsibility, and a leader who makes decisions that affect others is accountable for them. If a husband or father exercises authority, it must be exercised with discernment, according to God's truth and for the good of those in his care. Failing to do so brings guilt on him.

That principle points toward the New Testament's far higher calling for husbands. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy... In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies" (Ephesians 5:25, 28). Under the old covenant, a husband who annulled his wife's vow late had to bear the consequences himself. Under the new covenant, a husband is called to lay down his life for the good of his wife. We should be careful here not to push the comparison too far. A husband cannot atone for his wife's sin, and he is not her redeemer. Only Christ reconciles sinners to God. But Christ's self-giving love is the pattern for a husband's love, and that is a greater and higher calling than anything Numbers 30 required.

Notice, too, that the command is not conditional. Paul does not say, "Love your wives as Christ loved the church, if they

submit to you." The church has often been far from faithful to Christ, yet He died for her and will never forsake her. The command to love is addressed to the husband, and it is a summons to examine his own conduct, not a tool for measuring his wife's failures. Paul adds, "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19). And fathers should "not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). Men who lead their families need to pray daily for the wisdom and grace to lead in a godly way, so that a legacy of faith can be passed on to the generations that follow.

Numbers 30 also reminds us of the seriousness of the vows we make. For most of us today, the one vow we are likely to make is a marriage vow. We may think of it as a promise made only to each other. But Scripture treats marriage as a covenant made before God. Malachi rebuked men who were unfaithful to their wives, "because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth" (Malachi 2:14). Jesus said, "Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). The sanctity of the marriage vow lies not only in what husband and wife promised each other, but in what they promised before God. In the Old Testament, a husband could annul his wife's rash vow. But who will annul the vow we made to the Lord when we committed ourselves to our spouse?

For that reason, we believe it is wrong for husbands or wives to divorce for this reason or that, simply because the marriage has become difficult or disappointing. Consider what Jesus bore on the cross. He did not die for small and inconsequential sins. Liars, murderers, and adulterers are covered by His blood. How much more should we bear with the faults and shortcomings of

our spouses? And those who counsel divorce too readily, for matters Scripture does not recognize, should consider whether they are giving a true picture of Christ's faithful love.

At the same time, we need to be careful and complete in applying this. Jesus Himself addressed sexual immorality as a ground for divorce (Matthew 19:9), and Paul addressed the case of a believer whose unbelieving spouse leaves: "The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances" (1 Corinthians 7:15). Christians differ on exactly how these passages apply, but they cannot responsibly be ignored. And the call to bear with a spouse's shortcomings must not be confused with enduring violence, abuse, or ongoing destructive conduct. Christlike love does not require concealing serious wrongdoing or remaining exposed to harm. Protection, truthful accountability, and, where needed, separation may be necessary while the longer questions of a marriage are considered. Sympathy and sensitivity toward people in painful situations do not compromise God's truth; they are part of "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

The most searching application is personal. Do we keep our promises when they become inconvenient? Do we listen before defending ourselves, repent without shifting blame, and seek the good of those closest to us? Marital faithfulness is far more than the absence of a divorce. It is the daily practice of dependable, self-giving love under Christ's authority. Let us keep the vows we have made, to the Lord and before the Lord, so that it may go well with our souls.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Two lambs were offered every morning and evening, every day of the year, and still sin was never finally removed. How

does Hebrews 10:11–12, with its picture of Christ "sitting down," deepen your appreciation of His finished work?

2. Christians are free to observe or not observe the Old Testament festivals. What practices in your life help you remember corporately and personally what God has done in Christ?
3. Paul says believers are "the pleasing aroma of Christ" in the world. What does your daily life communicate about Christ to those around you?
4. David refused to offer God something that cost him nothing. What does your worship cost you? Are there ways you have been offering God "cheap" worship?
5. Numbers 30 held a husband or father accountable for how he used his authority over a vow. Whatever your role, how do you use the influence God has given you over others? Do you accept responsibility for the consequences of your decisions?
6. Marriage is a covenant made before God. If you are married, what would it look like this week to love your spouse the way Christ loves the church? If you are not married, what promises have you made that you need to keep?

Chapter Fourteen

Numbers 31–32

As Moses' life drew to its close, God gave him one final task: "Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people" (Numbers 31:2). Chapter 31 records that war, and it contains some of the most difficult commands in all of Scripture. Chapter 32 then tells how two and a half tribes asked to settle east of the Jordan, and how close they came to repeating the sin of their fathers. Both chapters are about the unfinished business of the wilderness years: the judgment on Peor, and the danger that a new generation might fail as the old one had.

To understand chapter 31, we have to remember chapter 25. There, Moabite and Midianite women had deliberately enticed Israelite men into sexual immorality and the worship of Baal of Peor. It was a calculated strategy, devised on Balaam's advice, to bring Israel under God's judgment when a curse could not. And it worked: twenty-four thousand Israelites died. Worse still, Kozbi, the daughter of a Midianite leader, had been brought into the camp in open defiance, while the people wept at the tent of meeting. God had then said, "Treat the Midianites as enemies and kill them. They treated you as enemies when they deceived you in the Peor incident" (Numbers 25:17–18).

Now the time had come. "Arm some of your men to go to war against the Midianites so that they may carry out the LORD's vengeance on them" (Numbers 31:3). This was not primarily Israel's revenge. It was the Lord's vengeance, carried out through Israel. "Moses sent them into battle, a thousand from each tribe, along with Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, who

took with him articles from the sanctuary and the trumpets for signaling" (Numbers 31:6). The presence of Phinehas, who had turned away God's wrath at Peor, and of the holy articles, made clear that this was a holy war, fought at God's command.

Israel defeated the Midianites and killed their five kings. And the chapter adds, almost in passing, "They also killed Balaam son of Beor with the sword" (Numbers 31:8). The man who had prayed, "Let me die the death of the righteous," died among the enemies of God's people, for the very counsel that had led Israel into sin.

It is sad to see how corrupt a whole people can become. Moses himself had once fled to Midian, lived there for forty years, and married Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest. His father-in-law Jethro had given him wise counsel and had praised the Lord for delivering Israel from Egypt (Exodus 18:9–11). Yet now Midian had joined Moab in a deliberate campaign to lead Israel away from God.

Then comes the hardest part of the chapter. When the army returned with the Midianite women and children as captives, "Moses was angry with the officers of the army.... 'Have you allowed all the women to live?' he asked them. 'They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and enticed the Israelites to be unfaithful to the LORD in the Peor incident, so that a plague struck the LORD's people'" (Numbers 31:14–16). And he commanded, "Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man" (Numbers 31:17–18).

We must be honest: this is one of the most difficult passages in the Bible. It has been a stumbling block for many readers, and some dismiss this part of Israel's history as self-serving

nationalism dressed in religious language. We should not move past it too quickly or pretend that it raises no hard questions. It does. The killing of children in particular is deeply disturbing to read, and it should be.

Faithful interpreters have approached this passage in several ways, and no single explanation resolves every difficulty. Some emphasize the context: the Midianite women had been the very instruments of a deliberate plan to corrupt Israel, and that plan had already killed twenty-four thousand people. Israel was a fragile, newly formed covenant people about to enter a land full of similar practices, and the preservation of their covenant identity was at stake. Others point out that the chapter describes specific ancient practices of warfare within a unique moment of God's judgment, without presenting them as a timeless ethical pattern. Still others emphasize the vast difference between God's holiness and ours.

That last point deserves reflection. The real issue for many readers is that God's lordship and holiness are measured by our standards of justice rather than His. When people think of sin, they typically think only of breaking moral codes their society already agrees on. But God's standard is very different from ours. His holiness has no room for sin at all. And we cannot understand the love shown at the cross unless we first grasp the holiness of the God who would not overlook sin, even at the cost of His own Son. These difficult passages should drive us not to confident judgments about God, but to humility about our own condition, and to a deeper sense of our desperate need for His mercy.

We should also say two things plainly. First, this passage gives no standing permission to any church or any modern

nation to identify its enemies as "Midianites" and claim God's authorization for violence against them. It records a specific act of divine judgment in a unique period of redemptive history. The New Testament directs the church's witness through proclamation, service, endurance, and love for enemies, not through the sword. Second, even within the Old Testament, Israel's law regulated the treatment of captive women, forbidding them to be sold or treated as slaves (Deuteronomy 21:10–14). The girls who were spared were brought into Israel's life, not left to die.

The story of Midian does not end here. Since the Midianites were a nomadic people, not all of them perished in this campaign. Generations later, in the days of the judges, Israel's own disobedience led God to hand them over to Midianite oppression for seven years. The Midianites "came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts" (Judges 6:5), devouring Israel's crops, just as Leviticus 26 had warned that enemies would eat the harvest of a disobedient people (Leviticus 26:16). Then God raised up Gideon and his three hundred men to defeat them, and "Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again" (Judges 8:28). God's justice worked out over generations. It was not capricious or reactive. "He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity" (Psalm 98:9).

After the battle, the soldiers had to be purified. "Anyone who has killed someone or touched someone who was killed must stay outside the camp seven days" (Numbers 31:19). The captives and even the plunder had to be cleansed, metal objects by fire and everything by the water of cleansing (Numbers 31:23). Even a war fought at God's command left those who

fought it unclean. Death defiled, and the victorious soldiers could not simply walk back into the camp as though nothing had happened. There is something important in that. Even when violence is ordained, it is never treated as a light or clean thing.

The plunder was divided equally between the soldiers who fought and the rest of the community who stayed behind (Numbers 31:27), with a portion given to the Lord for the priests and Levites. Those who risked their lives received a larger share per person, since they were fewer, but the whole community shared in the victory. David would later make a similar rule: those who stayed with the supplies were to share equally with those who went into battle (1 Samuel 30:24).

Then came a remarkable report. The officers came to Moses and said, "Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command, and not one is missing" (Numbers 31:49). How often do we hear of soldiers going into battle and every one of them coming home? That must be very rare. Nothing in the text suggests that Israel vastly outnumbered Midian or caught them entirely by surprise. This was a battle ordered by God. Midian was outnumbered not by Israel but by God. They found themselves fighting not merely against an army, but against the living God.

The officers' response is instructive. They did not boast about their military skill. They brought an offering. "So we have brought as an offering to the LORD the gold articles each of us acquired... to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD" (Numbers 31:50). The gold amounted to 16,750 shekels, and Moses and Eleazar "brought it into the tent of meeting as a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD" (Numbers 31:54).

They recognized that their survival was God's gift, and they responded with gratitude and humility.

Some have suggested that because Israel was faithful and God was with them, they suffered no casualties, and that this was the kind of perfect victory God had promised in the conquest of Canaan. That is a reasonable inference, and the conquest that followed does show that when Israel obeyed, God gave them victory. But we should notice that the chapter does not quite say this. Earlier, Moses had been angry with these very officers. Their survival did not mean that every decision they made met with God's approval. A favorable outcome by itself does not validate every choice of a leader or an institution. Success can tempt us to dismiss questions about our conduct.

The pattern of blessing for obedience and loss for disobedience was real under the Mosaic covenant. After Joshua's death, when Israel turned away from God, He said, "Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died" (Judges 2:20–21). Most of Israel's history, sadly, was filled with the consequences of unfaithfulness rather than the blessings of obedience. The moments of victory were glimpses of God's grace in the midst of human failure. At the same time, the Old Testament is not a mechanical reward chart. It also shows righteous people suffering and wicked people prospering for a time, and God preserving Israel in spite of their failures. Grace came before Sinai, in the exodus itself.

We who belong to Christ share Israel's sinful nature, but we live under a different covenant, one inaugurated by the blood of Jesus. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth

came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). Under this covenant, we do not earn our standing with God by keeping our side of the bargain. Our salvation rests entirely on what God has done, is doing, and will complete for us in Christ. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus took our sin and gave us His righteousness.

That does not make obedience unimportant. Under the new covenant, God writes His law on our hearts, and grace itself "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:12). Obedience does not purchase God's acceptance, but grace makes obedience real. And the full experience of victory, joy, and blessing that comes with our salvation must wait for eternity. In this life we may face hardship and suffering, and present ease is never the measure of God's love for us. We live our earthly days sustained by a sure hope, looking to Jesus as our example: "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Chapter 32 turns to a very different kind of test. "The Reubenites and Gadites, who had very large herds and flocks, saw that the lands of Jazer and Gilead were suitable for livestock" (Numbers 32:1). These were the lands east of the Jordan that Israel had just taken from Sihon and Og. So they came to Moses and asked, "If we have found favor in your eyes... let this land be given to your servants as our possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan" (Numbers 32:5).

Moses' reaction was immediate and fierce: "Should your fellow Israelites go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land the LORD has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to look over the land" (Numbers 32:6–8). Moses had seen this before. Forty years earlier, the people had refused to enter the land, and a whole generation had died in the wilderness. Now, on the very border, it looked as though history was about to repeat itself. "And here you are, a brood of sinners, standing in the place of your fathers and making the LORD even more angry with Israel" (Numbers 32:14).

It is amazing how history tends to repeat itself. The children of the generation that refused the land seemed about to commit the same sin as their parents. Their request may have been motivated partly by practical concerns, but it looked like a refusal to go where God was leading, and it threatened to discourage everyone else.

Fortunately, they learned the lesson before they actually disobeyed. "Then they came up to him and said, 'We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we will arm ourselves for battle and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place.... We will not return to our homes until each of the Israelites has received their inheritance'" (Numbers 32:16–18). They offered to go ahead of their brothers into battle and not return home until the whole land was conquered.

Moses accepted, with a solemn warning: "If you will do this—if you will arm yourselves before the LORD for battle... then after that you may return and be free from your obligation

to the LORD and to Israel.... But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the LORD; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:20, 22-23).

That last phrase has become famous: "you may be sure that your sin will find you out." It is often quoted as a general warning that hidden sins will eventually be exposed, and that is true enough. But in its context, it is a warning about failing to keep a promise to help one's brothers. The sin in view is the sin of leaving others to fight alone while we enjoy our own comfort.

There is a small but revealing detail in this conversation. When the Reubenites and Gadites spoke, they said they wanted to build "pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children." When Moses answered, he reversed the order: "Build cities for your women and children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised" (Numbers 32:24). Many readers have noticed the gentle correction. The tribes had put their livestock first; Moses put their families first. Our priorities show in the order of our concerns.

Some readers see in this episode a picture of God's graciousness: they wanted the land east of the Jordan, and God gave them the desires of their hearts (Psalm 37:4). There is truth in that. But we should notice that it was not simply a matter of asking and receiving. Moses' first response was suspicion and rebuke. The request was granted only after the tribes committed themselves to fight alongside their brothers, so that getting what they wanted would not come at their brothers' expense. It was a negotiated commitment, with a warning attached.

And the tribes did keep their word. Years later, after the conquest was complete, Joshua commended them: "You have

done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. For a long time now... you have not deserted your fellow Israelites" (Joshua 22:2-3). The half-tribe of Manasseh had joined them in settling east of the Jordan (Numbers 32:33).

Still, we might wonder whether their choice was wise in the long run. Like Lot, who "looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered" and chose it for himself (Genesis 13:10-11), these tribes chose land that was good for their livestock rather than land within the boundaries God had promised. Separated from the other tribes by the Jordan River, they later found themselves in a misunderstanding that nearly led to civil war (Joshua 22). And they were among the first to be carried into exile when the Assyrians invaded (1 Chronicles 5:26). Choices made for convenience can have consequences that reach far beyond what we intend.

This chapter also has something to say about repeated sin. No one is perfect; everyone sins. But when we find ourselves falling into the same sin over and over, as Israel's new generation nearly did, we need to go straight to God for help, because there is an issue with our hearts. We need to learn the lesson, not keep repeating the same sin. And often, as here, it takes a direct, honest confrontation from someone who cares about us to help us see that we are about to walk in the footsteps of those who went before us. God will bless those who come to Him for help.

Finally, the Reubenites and Gadites remind us that we do not fight alone, and we are not meant to rest while our brothers and sisters are still in the battle. Paul writes, "not looking to your

own interests but each of you to the interests of the others" (Philippians 2:4), and "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). It is easy, once we have found our own comfortable place, to lose interest in the struggles of others. But the body of Christ is one, and God calls us to keep our commitments to one another until everyone has received their inheritance.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Numbers 31 contains commands that are deeply troubling to read. How do you approach passages like this? What does it mean to let such texts drive you toward humility and a deeper awareness of God's holiness, without pretending they raise no hard questions?
2. Even soldiers who fought at God's command had to be purified before returning to the camp. What does this teach you about the seriousness of death and violence, even when they seem justified?
3. When no soldier was lost, the officers brought an offering of gratitude rather than boasting. How do you respond when God protects you or gives you success? Do you give Him the credit?
4. The Reubenites and Gadites nearly repeated their fathers' sin. Is there a sin you find yourself repeating? Who in your life could lovingly confront you, as Moses did?
5. "You may be sure that your sin will find you out" was spoken about failing to help one's brothers. Where might you be tempted to settle into your own comfort while others in the body of Christ are still struggling?

6. The tribes put their livestock before their families, and Moses reversed the order. What do the order of your concerns and the use of your time reveal about your priorities?

Chapter Fifteen

Numbers 33–34

As Israel stood on the plains of Moab, ready to cross the Jordan, God told Moses to look back and to look ahead. Chapter 33 looks back, recording every stage of Israel's journey from Egypt to the edge of Canaan. Then it looks ahead, with a command and a warning about how to live in the land. Chapter 34 draws the boundaries of the inheritance God was about to give them. Memory and hope, the road behind and the land ahead, belong together.

"Here are the stages in the journey of the Israelites when they came out of Egypt by divisions under the leadership of Moses and Aaron. At the LORD's command Moses recorded the stages in their journey" (Numbers 33:1–2). What follows is a list of about forty campsites, from Rameses in Egypt to the plains of Moab. To modern readers, it can look like little more than a string of unfamiliar names. But God commanded that it be written down. It was Israel's travel log, a communal memory of where they had been and how God had led them.

The list begins with a vivid picture: "The Israelites set out from Rameses on the fifteenth day of the first month, the day after the Passover. They marched out defiantly in full view of all the Egyptians, who were burying all their firstborn, whom the LORD had struck down among them; for the LORD had brought judgment on their gods" (Numbers 33:3–4). The slaves walked out with their heads held high, while their masters buried their dead. Every false god of Egypt had been shown powerless before the Lord.

Then the stages go on. Many of the names bring stories to mind. At Marah the water was bitter, and God made it sweet. Then "They left Marah and went to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there" (Numbers 33:9). There was Rephidim, where there was no water to drink, and the Desert of Sinai, where they received the Law. There was Kibroth Hattaavah, the graves of craving, and Hazeroth, where Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses. There was Kadesh, where the people refused to enter the land. And there were many names we know nothing about, places where Israel camped for weeks or months or years during the long wandering, where nothing worth recording happened except that God kept them alive.

The list pauses at one place to record a death: "At the LORD's command Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor, where he died on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt. Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor" (Numbers 33:38–39).

Why was this list preserved? It gave Israel a history. Their life in the land would not begin as an achievement detached from the wilderness. It would rest on a history of deliverance, dependence, discipline, and continuing provision. The names reminded them that they had been led, even through stretches that felt repetitive or pointless at the time. Moses would later tell them, "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years" (Deuteronomy 8:2). The list of stages is that remembering, written down.

Reading these stages, many believers are reminded of their own journeys since the Lord brought them out of darkness.

Many of us had plans of our own, made for our own benefit, and ran into dead ends that left us perplexed, as though our plans, often motivated by selfish desires, were better than the Lord's. Looking back, we can see that we are where we are by His mercy, "according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). We may not know where the next stage of our journey on earth will be, but we can be sure of where it finally ends. Praise the Lord!

Looking back like this can be a wonderful exercise. It can reveal the difference between a plan we cherished and a plan that was good. Some desires show their self-centeredness only after circumstances prevent them. Gratitude can grow when we recognize that an apparent dead end kept us from a path we did not understand. At the same time, we should be careful not to claim more than we can know. Not every closed door was God's direct correction of our selfishness. Sometimes a lost opportunity involves someone else's wrongdoing, ordinary limitations, or decisions whose meaning remains unclear. Numbers gives us the narrator's view of Israel's journey, but Scripture does not give each of us that same inside view of our own. Faith can confess God's mercy without supplying an explanation for every event.

It might be worth trying this: think back over a few significant stages of your life and note what you can actually see. Where did God provide? Who helped you along the way? What sins were exposed? What did you learn? What promises sustained you? Leave the unanswered questions unanswered. The goal is neither self-congratulation nor fatalism, but a grounded readiness for the next step, taken in the company of the faithful Lord whose grace has already met us along the way.

After recounting the journey, God looked ahead: "When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (Numbers 33:51–53).

And then came a warning: "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them" (Numbers 33:55–56).

Notice the four consequences in that warning. The people who remained would become barbs in Israel's eyes, thorns in their sides, and trouble in the land. Those are serious. But the last consequence makes the first three pale in comparison: "I will do to you what I plan to do to them." It is one thing to have people against you. It is another thing altogether to have the Lord against you. If God treated Israel as He intended to treat the Canaanites, that would mean certain doom.

This is a principle that runs through the whole story. Israel's greatest asset was God. Israel's greatest liability was also God. Their power over Egypt and over the nations did not come from their numbers, their military skill, or their strategies. It came from God's grace alone. But being God's people did not place them beyond His judgment. If they embraced the practices for which the Canaanites were judged, their status as God's chosen people would not protect them. Election brought responsibility, not immunity. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). And yet, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

We know what happened. The book of Joshua records the conquest, and at the end of it Joshua renewed the covenant and sent each tribe to its inheritance. But by the first chapter of Judges, we learn that Israel did not drive out the inhabitants as God had commanded: "When Israel became strong, they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but never drove them out completely" (Judges 1:28). The Angel of the Lord confronted them: "Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? And I have also said, 'I will not drive them out before you; they will become traps for you, and their gods will become snares to you'" (Judges 2:2-3). It happened exactly as Numbers had warned.

And the consequences reached the next generation. "After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10). They served the Baals and the Ashtoreths of the surrounding peoples. By just the third generation, Israel no longer knew the God who had rescued their grandparents from Egypt and gone before their parents into Canaan. The earlier generation's failure to remove the Canaanites and their idols became exactly the "barb in the eyes" God had warned about.

Why did Israel compromise? It probably seemed to make more practical sense to use the Canaanites as forced labor than to drive them out. Why waste a workforce? That was a human calculation replacing simple obedience to God's command. It looked like pragmatic wisdom, but it quietly grew into generational disaster.

Jesus also gave us commands that do not always make sense from a human perspective. Instead of an eye for an eye, He tells

us to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to those who ask, and love our enemies, "that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:45, 48). Some of these commands seem unreasonable by ordinary standards. Will we set aside Jesus' words in favor of what seems sensible to us? Or will we trust the Lord because His ways are perfect? And if we do not follow God's ways in our generation, what will our children learn? By the third generation, will they know our God, or what He has done for us?

We should apply this passage carefully, however. The church is not called to drive anyone out of a national territory. We live among our neighbors and are called to love them, including those who oppose us. We should be especially cautious about labeling troublesome people as "thorns" to be removed. The New Testament equivalent of this command is to reject idolatry and sin in our own lives, to refuse to let the practices of the world take root among us, while bearing faithful witness to the world around us. The barbs and thorns we must deal with most ruthlessly are the ones in our own hearts.

The story in Judges adds something that seems strange at first. Because Israel disobeyed, God said, "I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD" (Judges 2:21-22). Rather than simply punishing them and urging them to obey, God made obedience harder. He allowed the nations to remain as a test, and the book of Judges records the results, failure after failure.

God had done the same in the wilderness, allowing Israel to hunger and thirst in order to test them. That should dispel any notion that trusting and obeying God was easy for the people of the Bible. It was not. Sometimes God made it harder. Consider three of the greatest figures in Scripture. Job cursed the day he was born (Job 3:1). Moses asked God to kill him rather than make him carry the people any longer (Numbers 11:15). Elijah sat under a broom tree and prayed, "I have had enough, LORD.... Take my life" (1 Kings 19:4). Each of these faithful servants reached a point of utter exhaustion.

And notice how God responded. None of these moments was treated as a failure of faith deserving rebuke. God answered Job with an overwhelming encounter with Himself. He answered Moses by appointing seventy elders to share the burden. And He answered Elijah with food, sleep, and a gentle whisper (1 Kings 19:5–12). Scripture's treatment of its most faithful figures at their lowest points is remarkably gentle. If you are exhausted in your walk with God, that is not necessarily evidence against your faith. You are in good company, and God knows how to care for you.

This passage also teaches us something about why we obey God. Sometimes we think about obedience mainly in terms of its benefits: people get along better, we are healthier, we are freer from anxiety and fear. Those benefits are real. But they should not be our primary reason for obeying. We obey because God, our Creator and Redeemer, commands it. When we focus on secondary reasons, there will come a time when those reasons seem to weaken, when disobedience appears to offer greater benefits. Then, having forgotten the primary reason, we give ourselves permission to disobey.

Parents especially need to keep this in mind. When we teach our children not to lie, we should not focus only on the social consequences of lying, but on the command of God, who calls us to be holy. We should teach morality on the firm ground of God's holy character rather than the shifting ground of social custom or convenience. We can and should teach temporal consequences, but we must keep the focus on God's command. Otherwise our children may conclude that the temporal benefits of ignoring God's commands outweigh the temporal costs, and forget the spiritual and eternal consequences altogether. Asaph struggled with exactly this when he saw the wicked prospering, until "I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73:17).

Scripture gives us a model for holding the reasons together. The Ten Commandments begin not with a command but with God's identity and His redemption: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). And Deuteronomy anticipates a child asking what God's laws mean. The answer begins with a story of rescue, "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand" (Deuteronomy 6:21), and ends with the assurance that God commanded these things "so that we might always prosper and be kept alive" (Deuteronomy 6:24). When we ground obedience first in who God is and what He has done, and then explain the goodness of His ways, our children receive both a firm foundation and a reason to love what God commands.

Israel's calling was to be wholly devoted to God and not distracted by the gods of the land. Ours is similar. Paul writes, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts

on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:1-3).

Someone once said, "Don't be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good." But Scripture teaches the opposite. If we want to be any real good on this earth, we must be heavenly-minded. Notice what Paul does next in Colossians 3. Having told believers to set their minds on things above, he tells them to put away sexual immorality, greed, anger, slander, and lying, and to "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Colossians 3:12). Then he addresses marriage, parenting, and work. Being heavenly-minded does not mean withdrawing from earthly responsibilities. It means letting Christ's reign and His coming determine how we live within them.

We are all busy, yet everything we are busy with will soon pass away. Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). And "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Luke 21:33). God's Word is what endures, and it is how He shapes us: "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

That is why daily time in God's Word matters so much. Some of us may have fallen away from regular reading. Others may be

chasing one emotionally charged worship experience after another, looking for the next spiritual high. Strong emotion in worship is not wrong; Scripture is full of exuberant praise, deep grief, and quiet reflection. But feelings alone do not produce maturity. The real question is whether our worship and our reading are cultivating truthfulness, love, and obedience over time.

So take this as an encouragement. The end matters more than the beginning, and what you do today matters more than what you did yesterday. If you have stopped reading, as we noted earlier, pick up again with today's passage rather than trying to catch up all at once. A reading plan is a servant of our attention, not a covenant by which we earn God's favor. As you read, you might ask three simple questions: What does this passage reveal about God? What does it expose in my life? What faithful step should I take in response? "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Chapter 34 gives the boundaries of the land. "When you enter Canaan, the land that will be allotted to you as an inheritance is to have these boundaries" (Numbers 34:2). The southern border ran through the Desert of Zin, near Kadesh Barnea, to the Wadi of Egypt. The western border was the Mediterranean Sea. The northern border ran from the sea to Lebo Hamath. And the eastern border followed the Jordan River down to the Dead Sea. "This will be your land, with its boundaries on every side" (Numbers 34:12).

It is remarkable that God drew these boundaries before Israel had conquered a single city west of the Jordan. The land was still full of Canaanites. And yet God spoke as though it were already theirs, because in His sight it was. He had promised it, and His promise was as good as done.

It is also worth noting that Israel never fully occupied these boundaries for long. Under David and Solomon, Israel's influence reached its greatest extent (1 Kings 4:21), but the nation's disobedience, division, and eventual exile meant that the promise was never enjoyed in its fullness. The prophet Ezekiel later described the boundaries of the land again, in a vision of Israel's future restoration (Ezekiel 47:13–48:29). We believe God will yet fulfill His promises to Abraham's descendants completely, though we recognize that faithful Christians understand those prophecies in different ways.

God also named the men who would divide the land: "These are the names of the men who are to assign the land for you as an inheritance: Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun" (Numbers 34:17), along with one leader from each tribe. And heading the list of tribal leaders is a familiar name: "Caleb son of Jephunneh, from the tribe of Judah" (Numbers 34:19). Forty years earlier, Caleb had stood almost alone in believing that God would give Israel the land. Now he was appointed to help divide it. His faithfulness was not forgotten.

Scripture tells us that God determines the boundaries of all peoples: "he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands" (Acts 17:26). And He determines the boundaries of our lives as well. The psalmist could say with gratitude, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance" (Psalm 16:6).

Whatever the boundaries of our earthly lives may be, those who belong to Christ have been given "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4). Like Israel on the plains of Moab, we have not yet entered it. But God has already drawn the boundaries, and in His sight it is already ours.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God commanded Moses to record every stage of Israel's journey. If you wrote down the major stages of your own spiritual journey, what would they be? Where can you see God's provision and guidance?
2. "I will do to you what I plan to do to them." What does this warning teach about the danger of thinking that belonging to God's people makes us immune to His discipline?
3. Israel chose forced labor over obedience because it seemed more practical. Where are you tempted to replace a clear but difficult command of Christ with a more "reasonable" alternative?
4. By the third generation, Israel no longer knew the Lord. What are you doing to ensure that the next generation in your family and church knows God and what He has done?
5. Job, Moses, and Elijah all reached points of exhaustion, and God met each of them with gentleness. How does this encourage you in your own seasons of weariness?
6. God drew Israel's boundaries before they had conquered the land, and Caleb was appointed to help divide it. What

promise of God are you called to trust today, before you can see it fulfilled?

Chapter Sixteen

Numbers 35–36

We have reached the final chapters of Numbers. Israel is camped on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from Jericho, and the book closes not with a battle or a crossing but with two sets of laws for life in the land. The first provides towns for the Levites and cities of refuge for those who have killed someone by accident. The second returns to the daughters of Zelophehad and the question of their inheritance. At first these may seem like quiet, even anticlimactic ways to end a book so full of drama. But both chapters are about the same thing: how a holy God would dwell among His people in the land, and how His gifts were to be protected and handed down.

Chapter 35 begins with the Levites. "Command the Israelites to give the Levites towns to live in from the inheritance the Israelites will possess. And give them pasturelands around the towns" (Numbers 35:2). The Levites would receive no tribal territory of their own, but they would receive forty-eight towns scattered throughout the land, each with pastureland for their flocks. Each tribe was to contribute towns "in proportion to the inheritance of that tribe" (Numbers 35:8), larger tribes giving more, smaller tribes fewer.

We noted earlier that Jacob had said of Levi, "I will scatter them in Jacob and disperse them in Israel" (Genesis 49:7). Here is that scattering, and here is how God redeemed it. The Levites were spread through every part of the land, so that no tribe was without those who knew and served the Lord. What had been pronounced as a curse became a means of blessing to the whole nation.

Six of these towns had a special purpose: "Six of the towns you give the Levites will be cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone may flee" (Numbers 35:6). Three were to be on each side of the Jordan. Joshua later named them: Kedesh in Galilee, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Hebron in Judah on the west; Bezer, Ramoth in Gilead, and Golan on the east (Joshua 20:7–8). They were spread across the land so that anyone could reach one quickly. Deuteronomy even required that roads to them be prepared (Deuteronomy 19:3).

Why were such cities needed? In ancient Israel, as in much of the ancient world, justice for a killing was pursued by a close relative of the victim, called "the avenger of blood." That meant that a person who killed someone by accident could face immediate, deadly retaliation from a grieving family member, with no chance to establish what had actually happened. The cities of refuge solved that problem. "They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that anyone accused of murder may not die before they stand trial before the assembly" (Numbers 35:12). And, as so often in the Law, the provision extended beyond Israel: "These six towns will be a place of refuge for Israelites and for foreigners residing among them" (Numbers 35:15).

Built into a legal system that modern readers often find harsh, then, was a provision for due process. It protected someone who had done real harm without intending it. And the law went further: "Anyone who kills a person is to be put to death as a murderer only on the testimony of witnesses. But no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness" (Numbers 35:30). God cared that justice be done, and that it be done fairly.

The chapter distinguishes carefully between murder and accidental killing. "If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death" (Numbers 35:16). The same was true of a stone or a wooden object used as a weapon. "If anyone with malice aforethought shoves another or throws something at them intentionally so that they die or if out of enmity one person hits another with their fist so that the other dies, that person is to be put to death" (Numbers 35:20–21). The key was malice. If someone acted with hatred, even if he intended only to harm rather than to kill, and the victim died, he was guilty of murder.

But "if without enmity someone suddenly pushes another or throws something at them unintentionally," the assembly was to judge between the accused and the avenger (Numbers 35:22–24). If the killing was found to be accidental, "The assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the avenger of blood and send the accused back to the city of refuge to which they fled. The accused must stay there until the death of the high priest, who was anointed with the holy oil" (Numbers 35:25). Only after the high priest died could he return home.

We should not miss an important point here. There was no sacrifice prescribed for murder. The penalty was death. "Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die" (Numbers 35:31). There was likewise no sacrifice for adultery or for blasphemy. The sacrificial system was never a way for someone to sin freely and then settle accounts with an animal. As we saw in Numbers 15, the person who sinned "defiantly," with a raised fist in God's face, had no sacrifice available.

At the same time, as we noted in Leviticus, the Law did provide a guilt offering for certain deliberate wrongs, such as

fraud or lying under oath, when the wrongdoer confessed and made full restitution plus a fifth (Leviticus 6:1–7). So the line Scripture draws is not simply between accidental and intentional sin. It is between wrongdoing that is confessed and made right, and wrongdoing committed in open defiance of God. Murder, because it destroyed a life made in God's image, could not be made right by restitution. "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Genesis 9:6).

The chapter ends with a solemn explanation: "Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it. Do not defile the land where you live and where I dwell, for I, the LORD, dwell among the Israelites" (Numbers 35:33–34). Why did murder matter so much? Because God lived among His people. The land was holy because He was there. Unpunished violence would defile the very place where God dwelt.

We are all guilty of sin and deserve to die. We were heading toward eternal judgment with no intention of turning around. But God took the initiative to make atonement, sending His Son to die so that He might dwell in us. He could have wiped away all humanity and started over. Instead, He chose the suffering of the cross, so that the eyes of our hearts might be opened and He might make His home among us. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Paul says we were God's enemies when we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son (Romans 5:10).

We should be careful here not to present Christ's death as simply one more case under Numbers 35. In that law, the

murderer paid for his own bloodshed. In the gospel, the sinless Son of God gave Himself for the guilty. The cross is an extraordinary act of saving grace, not a pattern for punishing the innocent in human courts. That makes His grace all the more astonishing. Hebrews speaks of "the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). Abel's blood cried out for justice; Christ's blood cries out for mercy.

All this was accomplished by God alone. It was not a cooperative project between God and us. "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:4–5). That is why believers are no longer driven by fear to obey, but compelled by grace to follow Him. And that grace does produce a response. The same passage goes on: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Ephesians 2:10). Repentance, faith, and obedience are real and meaningful in the life of grace. Christians explain the relationship between God's initiative and our response differently, but all agree that grace creates a new direction, not merely a new label on an unchanged life.

And God still dwells among His people. Paul tells the church, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). The holy presence that gives us assurance also gives weight to how we treat one another. A church cannot celebrate God's indwelling grace while ignoring violence, deceit, or exploitation within its own life.

The cities of refuge have long been seen as a picture of Christ. Hebrews seems to draw on this very image when it describes believers as those "who have fled to take hold of the hope set

before us" (Hebrews 6:18). "The name of the LORD is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe" (Proverbs 18:10). Whatever you are facing today, remember that you have a place to run, a refuge far more secure than any city in Israel, because it is the refuge of Almighty God Himself. It is Jesus, who loves you to the point of death.

But if we think about the comparison carefully, we find that the reality is much better than the picture. First, the city of refuge was for someone who had killed accidentally. It offered no protection to a murderer. But we are not accidental sinners. We sin by choice. And yet Christ receives us anyway. On the cross, He prayed even for those who crucified Him, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Second, the city of refuge protected the killer from the avenger, but that was all it could do. Christ does not merely protect us from evil. He has the power to destroy it. He is both our shield and our sword.

Third, think about how long someone might have had to wait in a city of refuge. Release came only with the death of the high priest. Imagine being fifty-six years old when you accidentally killed someone and fled to the city, only to learn that the high priest had just turned twenty-nine and was in excellent health! You might never go home. Or you might go home only for a few years at the very end of your life. And even then, where would you be going? Back to your own plot of land, perhaps in a hot and dry country, among neighbors who remembered what you had done.

Many interpreters have seen in the death of the high priest a foreshadowing of Christ. The death of one particular priestly figure released the refugee from confinement and restored him

to normal life. But our High Priest does not need to die at some uncertain future date for our freedom to come. He has already died, once for all, and He lives forever. "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him" (Hebrews 7:24–25). Our release is not temporary asylum awaiting a future event. It is permanent from the moment we flee to Him.

And Jesus gives us not merely a ticket home, but a ticket to a home we have never known, one that God has prepared in His love: "My Father's house has many rooms.... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me" (John 14:2–3). The comparison with the city of refuge, then, turns out to be a stretch in every direction. We are worse than the accidental killer, Christ is far better than any city, and heaven is so much more than home!

Chapter 36, the last chapter of Numbers, returns to the daughters of Zelophehad. In chapter 27, God had ruled that because their father died without sons, they would inherit his land. Now the family heads of their clan, from the tribe of Manasseh, raised a practical concern. What would happen when these daughters married? If they married men from other tribes, their land would become part of their husbands' tribes. "When the Year of Jubilee for the Israelites comes, their inheritance will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their property will be taken from the tribal inheritance of our ancestors" (Numbers 36:4). Over time, Manasseh's inheritance would shrink.

This was a genuine legal problem, and the leaders did exactly what the daughters had done before: they brought it to Moses. And Moses again sought the Lord's answer. "Then at the LORD's

command Moses gave this order to the Israelites: 'What the tribe of the descendants of Joseph is saying is right. This is what the LORD commands for Zelophehad's daughters: They may marry anyone they please as long as they marry within their father's tribal clan'" (Numbers 36:5–6). And the principle behind it: "No inheritance in Israel is to pass from one tribe to another, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal inheritance of their ancestors" (Numbers 36:7).

Notice that this later ruling did not revoke the earlier one. The daughters kept their inheritance. The new ruling addressed a consequence that had become apparent and preserved both the women's inheritance and the tribe's allotment. And it gave the daughters freedom: "They may marry anyone they please," within the boundary of their clan.

It is interesting how much care was taken to preserve the inheritance God had given, so that His promises would not be eroded over time. God had drawn the boundaries of the land, and those boundaries were meant to endure. Even the Year of Jubilee was designed to restore every family's portion. This chapter shows the same concern at work in the ordinary arrangements of family life.

And the daughters' response is worth noticing. "So Zelophehad's daughters did as the LORD commanded Moses. Zelophehad's daughters—Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milkah and Noah—married their cousins on their father's side" (Numbers 36:10–11). In chapter 27, these women had boldly approached Moses with their request. Rather than complaining or spreading discontent through the camp, as so many had done in the wilderness, they took the proper route to voice their concern. Because they handled the matter rightly, they not only received

their own inheritance but established a law that would protect daughters in other families as well. Now, when a restriction was placed on them, they did not complain about its unfairness. They simply obeyed.

We do not hear from them again. Their story ends not with a dramatic reward, but with quiet obedience. Scripture seems content to let it end there, trusting us to believe that such faithfulness mattered to God even without narrating how He honored it. Real obedience does not require a visible reward to be genuine. Our God is faithful to provide for our needs, and our part is to obey, even when obedience comes with limits we would not have chosen.

This chapter also teaches something about how to handle questions of God's will. The clan leaders identified a real problem and brought it forward. They reasoned carefully about its consequences. But they did not simply reason their way to a conclusion. They brought the question to God, and Moses answered, "This is what the LORD commands" (Numbers 36:6). Careful reasoning served obedience rather than replacing it.

Moses had direct revelation from God in a way we do not. But we have God's Word, complete, in the Scriptures. And we have this promise: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Notice that the promise is not that believers will be partially equipped by Scripture, but "thoroughly equipped." That does not mean that reasoning, practical knowledge, and the counsel of others are useless. It means that none of them can replace God's Word as our authority for faithful living.

Do we go to such lengths to preserve the integrity of God's Word today? It is easy to find people who defend their personal experiences with deep emotion, or church leaders who firmly resist anyone who questions long-held traditions. Meanwhile, those who insist that everything be measured by the standard of Scripture are sometimes dismissed as divisive or negative. In the early church, "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). Today, churches sometimes grow instead by telling people what they want to hear, offering impressive facilities and programs, and calling every happy event a "sign" or a "miracle," without considering how Scripture itself uses those words.

Some speak of the Bible the way Israel once spoke of the temple. Jeremiah warned, "Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!'" (Jeremiah 7:4). It is possible to say "The Bible, the Bible, the Bible," as though merely mentioning it makes everything we say and do right, while picking out what agrees with our point of view and interpreting the rest in light of our experience. When that happens, experience has become the test of Scripture rather than the other way around.

Our own conviction, as we have said before, is that the revelatory gifts of the apostolic age have ceased, and that those who have claimed direct revelation from God in our day have not been reliable. Many sincere believers disagree, and they too affirm the final authority of Scripture. Paul wrote that prophecy speaks "to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort" (1 Corinthians 14:3), and he told the Thessalonians, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good" (1

Thessalonians 5:19–21). Openness and testing belong together in that passage. Whatever our convictions about spiritual gifts, no experience, and no claim to be defending the Bible, is exempt from careful examination. Those who critique others must also handle the evidence fairly and remain teachable. Like the Bereans, we should receive teaching eagerly and examine the Scriptures daily "to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11).

So let us learn our Bibles well, and let us trust them above every wind of doctrine and every tempting experience by which the enemy of our souls would try to trip us up.

The book of Numbers ends with a simple summary: "These are the commands and regulations the LORD gave through Moses to the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho" (Numbers 36:13). The book that began at Sinai ends on the edge of the Promised Land. The generation that came out of Egypt is gone. Their children stand at the Jordan, counted, organized, instructed, and ready. God has kept every promise He made, the promises of judgment and the promises of blessing alike. And the story is not over. In Deuteronomy, Moses will speak to this new generation one last time before they cross the river without him.

For us, too, the journey is not over. We have not yet entered our inheritance. But the One who led Israel through the wilderness, who fed them, disciplined them, bore with them, and brought them to the border of the land, is the same God who has promised to bring us home. He has drawn the boundaries. He has prepared the place. And our High Priest lives forever to bring us in.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The cities of refuge provided protection and a fair trial for someone who had killed by accident. What does this reveal about God's concern for both justice and mercy?
2. There was no sacrifice for murder, and "Bloodshed pollutes the land." How does this help you understand the seriousness of sin and the greatness of what Christ did in dying for the guilty?
3. Compare the city of refuge with the refuge we have in Christ. In what ways is Christ a far better refuge? Which difference means the most to you personally?
4. The daughters of Zelophehad brought their concern through proper channels and later accepted a limitation without complaint. How do you usually respond when you have a legitimate concern? How do you respond when obedience comes with limits you would not have chosen?
5. Moses answered the clan leaders' question by seeking "what the LORD commands." When you face a difficult question, do you tend to rely first on your own reasoning or experience, or on God's Word? How can careful thinking serve obedience rather than replace it?
6. Numbers ends with Israel on the edge of the Promised Land. As you finish this book, what has God taught you about His faithfulness in the "wilderness" seasons of your own life?

Conclusion

Kindness and Severity

We began Numbers with a mustering for war and a camp arranged around a tent; we ended it with cities of refuge and five sisters quietly doing what a rebellious generation never managed to do: simply obeying what God asked. Between those two points lies one of the most emotionally exhausting and spiritually honest books in Scripture, a book that does not flatter its own heroes, does not soften its God, and does not pretend that faith, once given, is easy to sustain across four difficult decades.

Three threads ran through nearly every chapter. The first was the patience of a God who bore with a difficult, frequently rebellious people for forty years without abandoning them. He fed them with manna every morning. He gave them water from the rock even when their leader failed. He turned a hired curse into a blessing. The years of wandering were years of discipline and preparation for the generation that would inherit the promise, not years of divine indifference toward the generation that forfeited it.

The second was the gravity of unbelief, traced to its roots rather than treated as an abstract failing. We watched craving spread through the camp, envy of God's appointed leaders boil into open revolt, and fear of the giants overwhelm the memory of everything God had done. We did not soften the death of an entire generation in the wilderness, any more than we softened the death of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus. Unbelief, this book insists, is not a minor lapse. It is the one thing capable of turning an eleven-day journey into a forty-year grave.

The third was the discovery, made again and again, that God's people can delay His purposes but never finally prevent them. Korah's rebellion could not unseat Aaron; a dead staff budded and bore fruit overnight. The ten spies' unbelief could not cancel the promise, only postpone it to the next generation. Balaam could not curse those whom God had blessed, and his attempt to corrupt Israel at Peor could not undo the covenant. Even Moses' own failure at Meribah could not stop Israel from entering the land under Joshua. And when the second census was taken, not one man remained of those counted at Sinai except Caleb and Joshua, exactly as God had said.

At every turn, Numbers also pointed beyond itself. The bronze snake lifted up in the wilderness became a picture of the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life. The Rock that gave water was Christ. Aaron standing between the living and the dead foreshadowed the High Priest who always lives to intercede for us. The star Balaam saw rising from Jacob shone over Bethlehem. And the cities of refuge became a picture of the refuge we have in Christ, whose death has already set us free and whose priesthood will never end.

Numbers does not end the story. It ends with Israel camped on the plains of Moab, across the Jordan from the land, ready at last to enter it under new leadership. But a question hangs over that ending, and Deuteronomy exists to answer it: now that this new generation stands where their parents stood and failed, will they remember what their parents forgot? Moses, before his death, will gather them once more to rehearse the whole story, the deliverance, the Law, the wilderness, the failures and the faithfulness, so that a generation who did not witness Egypt or

Sinai might carry forward everything their parents so nearly threw away.

If Numbers has taught us anything, it is that the kindness and severity of God run through the very same book, often through the very same chapter. The only fitting response to either is not analysis but worship: gratitude for a God patient enough to wait out forty years of unbelief, and reverence for a God who will never let that patience be mistaken for indifference to how His people live. We too are on a journey through the wilderness, and we have not yet entered our inheritance. But the God who brought Israel to the edge of the land is the same God who has promised to bring us home.

Appendix

Daily Bible Reading Plan

This is the same daily Bible reading plan we use at dailyqt.org, covering the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, in three hundred sixty-five daily readings. It does not begin on January 1st, and neither must you; begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. The sixteen readings that correspond to the chapters of this book, Numbers 1–2 through Numbers 35–36, fall about six weeks into the full sequence, but the complete year-long plan is reprinted here, as it is in every volume of this series, so that wherever you are in your reading you always have the whole plan close at hand. Check off each day's passage as you complete it, and feel no need to catch up all at once if you fall behind by a day or a week; simply pick up with the current day's reading. The goal was never a perfect record. It was a daily habit of opening God's Word, kept up faithfully enough, and long enough, that it becomes less a task to complete than simply the shape of an ordinary day.

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/10	Gen 1-3	1/11	Gen 4-7
1/12	Gen 8-11	1/13	Gen 12-15
1/14	Gen 16-18	1/15	Gen 19-21
1/16	Gen 22-24	1/17	Gen 25-26
1/18	Gen 27-29	1/19	Gen 30-31
1/20	Gen 32-34	1/21	Gen 35-37
1/22	Gen 38-40	1/23	Gen 41-42
1/24	Gen 43-45	1/25	Gen 46-47
1/26	Gen 48-50	1/27	Ex 1-3

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/28	Ex 4-6	1/29	Ex 7-9
1/30	Ex 10-12	1/31	Ex 13-15
2/1	Ex 16-18	2/2	Ex 19-21
2/3	Ex 22-24	2/4	Ex 25-27
2/5	Ex 28-29	2/6	Ex 30-32
2/7	Ex 33-35	2/8	Ex 36-38
2/9	Ex 39-40	2/10	Lev 1-4
2/11	Lev 5-7	2/12	Lev 8-10
2/13	Lev 11-13	2/14	Lev 14-15
2/15	Lev 16-18	2/16	Lev 19-21
2/17	Lev 22-23	2/18	Lev 24-25
2/19	Lev 26-27	2/20	Nu 1-2
2/21	Nu 3-4	2/22	Nu 5-6
2/23	Nu 7	2/24	Nu 8-10
2/25	Nu 11-13	2/26	Nu 14-15
2/27	Nu 16-17	2/28	Nu 18-20
3/1	Nu 21-22	3/2	Nu 23-25
3/3	Nu 26-27	3/4	Nu 28-30
3/5	Nu 31-32	3/6	Nu 33-34
3/7	Nu 35-36	3/8	Dt 1-2
3/9	Dt 3-4	3/10	Dt 5-7
3/11	Dt 8-10	3/12	Dt 11-13
3/13	Dt 14-16	3/14	Dt 17-20
3/15	Dt 21-23	3/16	Dt 24-27
3/17	Dt 28-29	3/18	Dt 30-31
3/19	Dt 32-34	3/20	Jos 1-4
3/21	Jos 5-8	3/22	Jos 9-11
3/23	Jos 12-15	3/24	Jos 16-18
3/25	Jos 19-21	3/26	Jos 22-24
3/27	Jdg 1-2	3/28	Jdg 3-5
3/29	Jdg 6-7	3/30	Jdg 8-9
3/31	Jdg 10-12	4/1	Jdg 13-15
4/2	Jdg 16-18	4/3	Jdg 19-21
4/4	Ruth	4/5	1 Sa 1-3
4/6	1 Sa 4-8	4/7	1 Sa 9-12
4/8	1 Sa 13-14	4/9	1 Sa 15-17
4/10	1 Sa 18-20	4/11	1 Sa 21-24

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
4/12	1 Sa 25-27	4/13	1 Sa 28-31
4/14	2 Sa 1-3	4/15	2 Sa 4-7
4/16	2 Sa 8-12	4/17	2 Sa 13-15
4/18	2 Sa 16-18	4/19	2 Sa 19-21
4/20	2 Sa 22-24	4/21	1 Ki 1-2
4/22	1 Ki 3-5	4/23	1 Ki 6-7
4/24	1 Ki 8-9	4/25	1 Ki 10-11
4/26	1 Ki 12-14	4/27	1 Ki 15-17
4/28	1 Ki 18-20	4/29	1 Ki 21-22
4/30	2 Ki 1-3	5/1	2 Ki 4-5
5/2	2 Ki 6-8	5/3	2 Ki 9-11
5/4	2 Ki 12-14	5/5	2 Ki 15-17
5/6	2 Ki 18-19	5/7	2 Ki 20-22
5/8	2 Ki 23-25	5/9	1 Ch 1-2
5/10	1 Ch 3-5	5/11	1 Ch 6
5/12	1 Ch 7-8	5/13	1 Ch 9-11
5/14	1 Ch 12-14	5/15	1 Ch 15-17
5/16	1 Ch 18-21	5/17	1 Ch 22-24
5/18	1 Ch 25-27	5/19	1 Ch 28-2 Ch 1
5/20	2 Ch 2-5	5/21	2 Ch 6-8
5/22	2 Ch 9-12	5/23	2 Ch 13-17
5/24	2 Ch 18-20	5/25	2 Ch 21-24
5/26	2 Ch 25-27	5/27	2 Ch 28-31
5/28	2 Ch 32-34	5/29	2 Ch 35-36
5/30	Ezr 1-3	5/31	Ezr 4-7
6/1	Ezr 8-10	6/2	Neh 1-3
6/3	Neh 4-6	6/4	Neh 7
6/5	Neh 8-9	6/6	Neh 10-11
6/7	Neh 12-13	6/8	Esth 1-5
6/9	Esth 6-10	6/10	Job 1-4
6/11	Job 5-7	6/12	Job 8-10
6/13	Job 11-13	6/14	Job 14-16
6/15	Job 17-20	6/16	Job 21-23
6/17	Job 24-28	6/18	Job 29-31
6/19	Job 32-34	6/20	Job 35-37
6/21	Job 38-39	6/22	Job 40-42
6/23	Ps 1-8	6/24	Ps 9-16

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
6/25	Ps 17-20	6/26	Ps 21-25
6/27	Ps 26-31	6/28	Ps 32-35
6/29	Ps 36-39	6/30	Ps 40-45
7/1	Ps 46-50	7/2	Ps 51-57
7/3	Ps 58-65	7/4	Ps 66-69
7/5	Ps 70-73	7/6	Ps 74-77
7/7	Ps 78-79	7/8	Ps 80-85
7/9	Ps 86-89	7/10	Ps 90-95
7/11	Ps 96-102	7/12	Ps 103-105
7/13	Ps 106-107	7/14	Ps 108-114
7/15	Ps 115-118	7/16	Ps 119:1-88
7/17	Ps 119:89-176	7/18	Ps 120-132
7/19	Ps 133-139	7/20	Ps 140-145
7/21	Ps 146-150	7/22	Prov 1-3
7/23	Prov 4-6	7/24	Prov 7-9
7/25	Prov 10-12	7/26	Prov 13-15
7/27	Prov 16-18	7/28	Prov 19-21
7/29	Prov 22-23	7/30	Prov 24-26
7/31	Prov 27-29	8/1	Prov 30-31
8/2	Ecc 1-4	8/3	Ecc 5-8
8/4	Ecc 9-12	8/5	Ss 1-8
8/6	Isa 1-4	8/7	Isa 5-8
8/8	Isa 9-12	8/9	Isa 13-17
8/10	Isa 18-22	8/11	Isa 23-27
8/12	Isa 28-30	8/13	Isa 31-35
8/14	Isa 36-41	8/15	Isa 42-44
8/16	Isa 45-48	8/17	Isa 49-53
8/18	Isa 54-58	8/19	Isa 59-63
8/20	Isa 64-66	8/21	Jer 1-3
8/22	Jer 4-6	8/23	Jer 7-9
8/24	Jer 10-13	8/25	Jer 14-17
8/26	Jer 18-22	8/27	Jer 23-25
8/28	Jer 26-29	8/29	Jer 30-31
8/30	Jer 32-34	8/31	Jer 35-37
9/1	Jer 38-41	9/2	Jer 42-45
9/3	Jer 46-48	9/4	Jer 49-50
9/5	Jer 51-52	9/6	Lam 1:1-3:36

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
9/7	Lam 3:37-5:22	9/8	Eze 1-4
9/9	Eze 5-8	9/10	Eze 9-12
9/11	Eze 13-15	9/12	Eze 16-17
9/13	Eze 18-20	9/14	Eze 21-22
9/15	Eze 23-24	9/16	Eze 25-27
9/17	Eze 28-30	9/18	Eze 31-33
9/19	Eze 34-36	9/20	Eze 37-39
9/21	Eze 40-42	9/22	Eze 43-45
9/23	Eze 46-48	9/24	Dan 1-3
9/25	Dan 4-6	9/26	Dan 7-9
9/27	Dan 10-12	9/28	Hos 1-7
9/29	Hos 8-14	9/30	Joel
10/1	Amos 1-5	10/2	Amos 6-9
10/3	Ob-Jonah	10/4	Micah
10/5	Nahum	10/6	Hab-Zeph
10/7	Haggai 1-2	10/8	Zech 1-7
10/9	Zech 8-14	10/10	Mal 1-4
10/11	Mat 1-4	10/12	Mat 5-6
10/13	Mat 7-8	10/14	Mat 9-10
10/15	Mat 11-12	10/16	Mat 13-14
10/17	Mat 15-17	10/18	Mat 18-19
10/19	Mat 20-21	10/20	Mat 22-23
10/21	Mat 24-25	10/22	Mat 26
10/23	Mat 27-28	10/24	Mark 1-3
10/25	Mark 4-5	10/26	Mark 6-7
10/27	Mark 8-9	10/28	Mark 10-11
10/29	Mark 12-13	10/30	Mark 14
10/31	Mark 15-16	11/1	Luke 1
11/2	Luke 2-3	11/3	Luke 4-5
11/4	Luke 6-7	11/5	Luke 8-9
11/6	Luke 10-11	11/7	Luke 12-13
11/8	Luke 14-16	11/9	Luke 17-18
11/10	Luke 19-20	11/11	Luke 21-22
11/12	Luke 23-24	11/13	John 1-2
11/14	John 3-4	11/15	John 5-6
11/16	John 7-8	11/17	John 9-10
11/18	John 11-12	11/19	John 13-15

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
11/20	John 16-18	11/21	John 19-21
11/22	Acts 1-3	11/23	Acts 4-6
11/24	Acts 7-8	11/25	Acts 9-10
11/26	Acts 11-13	11/27	Acts 14-15
11/28	Acts 16-17	11/29	Acts 18-20
11/30	Acts 21-23	12/1	Acts 24-26
12/2	Acts 27-28	12/3	Rom 1-3
12/4	Rom 4-7	12/5	Rom 8-10
12/6	Rom 11-13	12/7	Rom 14-16
12/8	1 Cor 1-4	12/9	1 Cor 5-8
12/10	1 Cor 9-11	12/11	1 Cor 12-14
12/12	1 Cor 15-16	12/13	2 Cor 1-4
12/14	2 Cor 5-9	12/15	2 Cor 10-13
12/16	Gal 1-3	12/17	Gal 4-6
12/18	Eph 1-3	12/19	Eph 4-6
12/20	Phi 1-4	12/21	Col 1-4
12/22	1 Thess 1-5	12/23	2 Thess 1-3
12/24	1 Tim 1-6	12/25	2 Tim 1-4
12/26	Titus-Phm	12/27	Heb 1-6
12/28	Heb 7-10	12/29	Heb 11-13
12/30	James	12/31	1 Pe
1/1	2 Pe	1/2	1 John
1/3	2 John-Jude	1/4	Rev 1-3
1/5	Rev 4-8	1/6	Rev 9-12
1/7	Rev 13-16	1/8	Rev 17-19
1/9	Rev 20-22		

About the Author

Eugene Han is the founder of dailyqt.org, an online community where readers have shared daily reflections on Scripture for more than a decade, following the reading plan printed in this book. He has taught Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas for many years, and much of the material in *The Daily Quiet Time Reflections Series* was first discussed aloud in those classrooms. He previously worked at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, and he has written books on personal finance and biblical theology as well as devotional works. He and his wife, Chi, live in Dallas, where their family runs a Taekwondo school together.

The Daily Quiet Time Reflections Series walks through the entire Bible, book by book, in daily readings designed to be read alongside an open Bible. More resources, including the daily readings and audio reflections, are available at dailyqt.org.