

Route 66

Numbers: Whining in the Wilderness

Part 4 – April 5, 2009

The title “Numbers” comes from the Greek reference to a census that takes place at the beginning *and* at the end of the book. The original Hebrew title is: “In the Wilderness” which refers to the tragic drama that unfolds in-between these two censuses.

In Genesis, the intimate relationship between God and man is destroyed, and the promise of a Messiah (to repair that damage) is pledged to Adam and Eve. To fulfill this promise, God makes a covenant with Abraham, his son Isaac, and his son Jacob/Israel to grow their family into a great nation and give them a Promised Land if they’ll obey Him.

In Exodus, 400 years have passed, the Israelites are a nation of slaves, God delivers them, gives them a code of conduct, and tells them to build a tent of worship. God’s glory then fills this tabernacle for all to see.

In Leviticus, God lays out the sacrifices and the festivals that will simultaneously purify His people, set them apart, *and* foreshadow this promised Messiah.

But now it’s time to *conquer* the Promised Land of Canaan.

God wants to make Israel the centerpiece of the world so mankind can begin to recognize and appreciate *His* holiness and His glory, and by contrast *their* sinfulness and need for a Savior. And so, Numbers begins!



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. He said: “Take a census of ... all the men in Israel twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army. - *Numbers 1:1-3 NIV*

All the men *except* for the Levites (remember Leviticus?). Aaron is the high priest, his sons are his assistants, and all the men of his tribe help out with the sacrifices and festivals. And now their tabernacle work includes guarding it, protecting it, and breaking it down and setting it up while on the march.

Barely a year since escaping Egypt, God’s chosen people have been made *spiritually* fit, their warriors are organized and are *physically* fit, and everyone is trembling with anticipation. But before God gives them the command to go, He dictates a special blessing to Moses, for Aaron to speak over His people:

Say to them: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace." - Numbers 6:23b-26 NKJ

Then, on the 20th day of the 2nd month of the 2nd year since leaving Egypt, the cloud of fire which hung above the tabernacle (since God's glory filled it), lifted and traveled before them. When it stopped they camped; when it moved they followed. It wasn't enough to be delivered *out of* bondage, God wanted to lead them *into* the blessing and peace of His promises. The goal is to come *out of* bondage and *into* blessing.

However, despite all God has done (in record time), and all He's promised to do, the people began to whine and gripe and complain. So, God sends fire into the camp that threatens to consume it; but the people cry out, Moses prays, and the fire goes out.



Then they began to pout and pine for Egypt!

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 11:5-6 NIV

About this time, Moses starts to get fed up with these folks. And he cries out to the Lord, "What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me?" (11:11) Instead of gratitude and faithfulness, at every turn these people respond to God with ingratitude and acts of rebellion. A good barometer of faith is the presence of gratitude.

Then God sends 30 days of quail and the people greedily gather about 60 bushels each! They apparently continue eating it even *after* its gone bad, and they are struck with a severe plague.

About this time, Aaron and Miriam got fed up with their little brother's wife and his leadership; so *they* rebelled against him!

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife ... "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 NIV

And the Lord wasn't happy. He strikes Miriam with leprosy and leaves Aaron powerless to help her. So, Aaron cries out to Moses, and Moses cries out to God, and God heals Miriam. And they arrive at Kadesh (the border of the Promised Land). This actually sounds similar to every family trip I've taken!

Twelve spies (one from each tribe) explore the land for 40 days. They bring back figs and pomegranates and a cluster of grapes so big it has to be suspended and carried between two poles. And they said, "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it *does* flow with milk and honey! But ..." and it's a big "but":



But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. ... All the people we saw there are of great size. ... We seemed like grasshoppers ... - *Numbers 13:28a;32b;33b NIV*

And they spread this terrifying report among God's people.

Only two of the spies trusted God: Joshua and Caleb. And they desperately tried to convince the people that God was with them. "But the whole assembly talked about stoning them." (14:10a) This is such a tragic, pivotal moment for these people.

Fear and rebel or trust and obey. It's the choice each of us will face many times in our faith: to focus on the size of our enemy or the greatness of our God. It's the difference between worry and worship; I can meditate on the problem (worry), or meditate on the Problem Solver (worship).



Q: So, how did they react? What did they do?

All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! ... And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." - *Numbers 14:2;4 NIV*

Their lack of gratitude for God's presence and provision and peace rendered them *incapable* of receiving His blessing. They could've gone straight into the Promised Land, but their constant grumbling and complaining had set them up to fall prey to the discouraging words of the faithless spies.

God calls Moses into the tabernacle and debates the pros and cons of just killing everyone and starting over. The conversation is profound in God's poignant, even pitiful sincerity.

The Lord said to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" - *Numbers 14:11-12 NIV*

God decides to wait for a new generation to rise up, one that won't keep looking back to Egypt, but forward to His promises. The ten faithless spies are immediately struck down by a plague, and the rest are sentenced to 40 years of wandering (one year for each day that the spies were in the Promised Land).



In this desert 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. Not one of you will enter the land ... except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. - *Numbers 14:29-30 NIV*

God *does* give them two years credit for time served.

When the people heard this they repented and decided to accept God's Promised Land. But it was too late. God is patient, but His patience had been taken for granted for too long. God's judgment *will* come!

Some of the warriors tried to raid the Promised Land, but they were overpowered by the enemy, the Canaanites and Amalekites. So, they remained in that wilderness of half-trust and half-victory for another 37 years. Wandering from here to there but arriving nowhere and accomplishing nothing.

During this time a Levite named Korah [KOH-ruh] led 250 well-known community leaders, council members, and Tabernacle workers in a revolt against the priestly system established by Moses. They thought holiness was subjective and they believed that they could approach God by their own standards of righteousness. So, Moses had them come before the Lord with their incense, and he warned everyone to stand WAY BACK. The earth suddenly opened up, swallowed their households, and closed back over them. Then "fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men who were offering incense." (16:35) This incident reminds us of the gulf between holiness and un-holiness that has been bridged by God's grace through Christ.

The next day the whole community grumbled against Moses for what God had done. And the Lord sent a plague upon them ... Aaron had to run to make atonement before everyone was destroyed.

Aaron ... 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. But 14,700 people died from the plague, in addition to those who had died because of Korah. - *Numbers 16:47-49 NIV*

Then, to make sure that everyone believed that God *had* chosen Aaron to be his high priest, Moses had the leader of each of the twelve tribes leave their staff in the Tabernacle overnight.

The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds. - *Numbers 17:8 NIV*

The story then jumps to when Moses is 120 years old and the old generation who held onto Egypt's customs and values are dead.

But when the people complain and blame Moses for not having enough water, Moses and Aaron snap. They don't realize that God is readying these people, and wants to demonstrate His power.

God instructs Moses to take the people to a certain rock, raise Aaron's "resurrected" staff, and command water to come forth. But Moses has lost his patience and he disobeys God.



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 NIV*

Ever wonder why the water came out when Moses disobeyed God?

It doesn't seem like God would honor Moses' actions; and I'm pretty sure Moses (and Aaron's staff) weren't magic. There's an old shepherd's trick. And Moses was an old shepherd.

Sedimentary rock is known to feature pockets where water can collect just below the surface ... [and] by breaking through the surface can release the collected water. - *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*

Moses most-likely recognized the tell-tale signs of trapped water. And in his anger he robbed God of the opportunity to demonstrate His power and build this new generation's trust.

Just before this, Moses' sister, Miriam had died. Just after this, Moses brother, Aaron will die. And because of this Moses will not be allowed into the Promised Land.

So, God had to demonstrate his power and build this new generation's trust another way; when they grumbled again, He sent venomous snakes among them, and they repented very quickly! However, God didn't take away the snakes. Instead he had Moses make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Whenever anyone was bitten they only had to look at the snake and they were healed.

As this new generation advances toward the Promised Land, they fight and win several battles along the way. The king of Moab gets nervous and hires a sorcerer named Balaam to curse Israel. But when Balaam opens his mouth to curse, all that comes out are God's blessings on Israel and judgments on her enemies.

When Moab saw they couldn't defeat Israel, they instead seduced her men into sin with some success. 24,000 Israelites lost their lives to a plague because of their rebellion against God.

And then we end where we began. A census is taken of all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel.

And then, on the plains of Moab, by the Jordan, across from Jericho, Moses appoints Joshua as his successor. The only question remaining is: will they settle for half-trust and half-victory like their parents and predecessors, or chose to follow God *all* the way?

What will *you* do?