

Numbers – Part 6

New Seeds of Hope (Numbers 31-36)

Throughout Scripture, almost every time God wanted to teach a spiritual truth to Israel, He taught it with a physical application that the people could relate to. Because the truths were tied to something tangible, it helped His people remember His promises, commands, and their relationship to Him. They reinforced spiritual realities. For instance:

- Altars were frequently used as physical reminders of special encounters with God, like Jacob's dream of the angel's ascending and descending a ladder from heaven. Jacob set up a stone pillar as a memorial. (Gen. 28:18).
- The unleavened bread and the lamb at Passover used these physical reminders to commemorate Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt, as well as looking forward to Christ's ultimate sacrifice for us. (Ex. 12:14). Other feasts reminded them of God's provision and protection during the wilderness journey. (Lev. 23:42-43).
- The Ark of the Covenant housed the tablets of the Law, Aaron's rod, and a jar of manna. They symbolized God's presence, guidance, care, and power among His people. (Nu. 10:33-36).
- The Sabbath was a weekly physical reminder of God's creation and a pattern that God established for His people that reminded them of their identity and relationship with Him. (Ex. 20:8-11; 31:13).
- Circumcision was a constant reminder of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants. (Gen. 17:10-11). In the N.T., circumcision symbolizes the inner transformation brought about by faith in Christ. (Rom. 2:29).
- In the N.T., baptism and communion are not symbols that give salvation as some practice with Baby Baptism, or used as Last Rights to "cleanse a person's soul of sins in preparation for the afterlife." Nowhere are these found in Scripture! God has given them as a symbol to remind us of spiritual truths. Baptism symbolizes a believer's identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 6:3-4). It is an outward expression of faith and commitment to follow Christ, something no infant can express through his/her own will. Communion is a memorial of Christ's sacrifice; it has no saving power. Only Christ's sacrifice can accomplish salvation, not the elements we use to remember it.

As we begin to study these final chapters of Numbers (Nu. 31-36), we see God bringing another spiritual truth to light through the physical use of fire and water.

I. Holy War

In Numbers 25, when Israel first camped on the opposite side of the Jordan River, across from Jericho, Balaam counseled the Midianites and Israel's men to "get to know each other." This led to sexual sin, leaders hanged for their lack of Godly leadership, a plague that killed 24,000 people, and Phinehas, Eleazar the high priest's son, slaying Simri, a prince of Simeon, and his Midianite princess playmate. God told Moses to, "Vex [Attack] the Midianites, and smite them [strike them dead, CSB], for they vex you

with their wives, [they attacked you with treachery, CSB] wherewith they have beguiled [deceived, seduced] you.” (Nu. 25:17-18).

The Midianites (descendants of Abraham by Keturah) were part of a large alliance of tribes which included the Ishmaelites, Moabites, Amalekites, and Ephah, but only the Midianites were targeted at this point. Moses called for 1,000 men from each tribe (excluding the Levites). Phinehas, though, went with the warriors, taking the holy instruments and the silver trumpets (Nu. 10) to blow the alarm and direct them. Since the Bible doesn’t clarify which “holy instruments” were taken, we can only surmise that it was the Ark of the Covenant where God dwelt above the Mercy Seat.

Israel is now set to destroy the Midianites (and Balaam) for their part in causing Israel to sin. (Nu. 31). Many commentators feel that Phinehas was acting as general, instead of Joshua, because God directed this “holy war.” Israel was not acting on their own accord, but were used as instruments of judgment by God, and upon His express command. (Nu. 31:1-12). No one today can claim this reason for war.

The Israelites destroyed the men and the five kings of Midian and burned their settlements but spared the women and children. They took them as captives, along with the spoil of all their cattle, flocks, and worldly goods. Moses, however, was unhappy that the women were allowed to live because they were the ones who had caused Israel to sin. Orders were given that all must be killed except the virgins, who could be kept as slaves. While this may seem extreme and cruel, this was common in the ancient world. Their entire life consisted of tribal warfare. As we progress through the Old Testament, we’ll see God’s judgment is poured out on whole groups of people who commit moral and other sinful pursuits; He demands holiness.

As a result of the uncleanness caused by their contact with the enemy and the dead bodies, they needed to be ceremonially cleansed (Nu. 19:11-22). Their clothing must be washed. A two-step cleansing was used on metal items. They went through fire to burn out internal impurities, then were washed to cleanse them from external impurities. (Nu. 31:19-24).

This two-step cleansing is another of the physical applications that reflect spiritual truths. In the N.T., we meet John the Baptist baptizing by immersion in the Jordan River because of the need for external cleansing. He had no power to save anyone but was only preparing the way for Jesus. When Jesus died, giving us the ability to be freed from our sins, He performed an internal cleansing of our hearts. (Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16). Both types of cleansing are important for purity. Jesus said that if only our outside is clean, we are like white-washed tombs that contain bones of the dead. Our hearts must be cleansed before we can enter heaven.

God is concerned with total purity in our lives. Putting on a “holy act” to show people we are “religious” does not mean Christ dwells within us. Speaking Christian words instead of swearing is good, but it means nothing if it is only a staged act done for appearances’ sake. But let’s take it a step further. Do we greet each other in church like we are happy to see someone, but under our breath we say, “I can’t stand that person?” Do we bow our heads as if we are in prayer... but quietly check our text messages instead? Externally and internally, we must be holy before God!

After the spoils were cleansed, the goods (800,000 animals and several million dollars of gold by today’s standards), and 32,000 virgins were divided equally between the

12,000 soldiers and the non-soldiers. Out of the soldiers, one portion in every 500 went to Eleazar, which meant he became wealthy overnight. Of the non-soldiers' portion, one in five (or 1/20) went to the rest of the Levites.

And so, they divided up the spoils of war, until... they realized that they had destroyed all the Midianite cities, taken all the captives, killed all these men, and yet, Israel experienced not a single casualty. Impossible! ... except the battle was the Lord's. When the captains realized that all 12,000 soldiers remained alive, as an offering of thanksgiving, they offered an extra portion to the Lord for His preservation.

II. Staying Behind

As the tribes camped on the east side of the Jordan and waited for God to lead them into Canaan, the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh looked at the lush pastures around them. It was a place for cattle—and they had a multitude of them! Why bother with the hassle of crossing the river when this land was perfect? (Nu. 32). Their logic fell short of the Lord's desire for the nation.

Contentment is where sin begins; it makes us feel we're good enough, instead of striving for God's best. These tribes were content to stay where they were. When they approached Moses and Eleazar with a request to stay there, Moses' reaction was swift! He feared these tribes were deserting the nation and shirking their obligation to assist in conquering the Promised Land: "Shall your brethren go to war, and ye sit here?" He didn't want them to discourage the others from possessing the land God had promised, like the ten spies had done when they had given their evil report to the people.

God was upset with this request, too. (Nu. 32:13-15). This wasn't the land of promise, the place of blessing and belonging, that He had set aside for them! Work still needed to be done; battles needed to be fought before God's promise could be fulfilled! The Lord declared they wouldn't receive their possession if they weren't willing to cross the river and fight. They were in this conquest together, which meant they must fight together. Only if these tribes agreed to join their brethren in subduing their Canaanite enemies would they be able to claim the land on the east side of the Jordan River.

So, it was agreed upon. The tribes that desired to remain outside of Canaan would build sheepfolds for their cattle and cities for their families. When this was done, they would arm themselves and fight alongside their brethren until every person of Israel could claim his inheritance from God. Only then could they return and be guiltless before the Lord and before Israel. Only then could they claim the land of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og, king of Bashan, as their possession from God.

At the time, this may have seemed like a good compromise, but ultimately, it was disastrous! The leaders kept their vows and fought beside their brethren to conquer Canaan, yet their decision to build homes and raise their families outside of Canaan was not good. Not only would they be geographically distant from the other tribes, but spiritually they would become distant from the Lord. "They transgressed against the God of their fathers, and went a whoring after the gods of the people of the land..." As a result, God punished them by allowing the king of Assyria to take them captive. (I Chr. 5:25-26).

III. Remembering the Journey

“And Moses wrote their goings out according to their journeys by the commandment of the LORD...” (Nu. 33:2). The New Testament reminds us that what was recorded by Moses and all other Scripture was not by man’s own words, “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (I Pet. 1:21). Moses records 42 different locations that Israel camped in their “Journal of Wandering.”

God told Moses to tell the children of Israel what He expected when they went into Canaan. “When,” not “if,” but when they come into Canaan, they must:

- Drive out the inhabitants that are there
- Destroy all their pictures, molten images, and high places
- Take possession of the land and inhabit it
- Divide the land by lot for an inheritance
- If they don’t do this, these people would be thorns in their flesh and trouble them.

God set the boundaries that Israel would occupy (Nu. 34) and told them who the princes of each tribe would be. Each of the twelve tribes would have a portion, but Gad, Reuben, and half the tribe of Manasseh would claim their portion on the east side of the Jordan River, if they followed through with what they had agreed to. The tribe of Levi would receive certain cities to dwell in, and portions of their suburbs to house their cattle. The rest of the tribes would inherit Canaan on the west side of the Jordan River. God was so sure that what He said would come to pass, He told them where they would live *before* they even started conquering the nations! He’s amazing!

Six cities assigned to the Levites were designated as Cities of Refuge. (Nu. 35:10-15). If a person accidentally killed someone, they could flee to one of these cities and have protection from an avenger. They would stay there until a trial could be held, and they could be judged by the congregation. If he was judged and found not guilty of intentional murder, he was allowed to remain in the city of refuge that he fled to, but he must remain there until the death of the high priest. If he left the city and the avenger found him outside and killed him, the avenger would not be considered guilty. If he was found guilty, he was considered to be a murderer, and must die.

Finally, the last chapter of Numbers (Nu 36) illustrates God’s wisdom as He preserves the rights of individuals and ensures the tribal boundaries remain intact. This decree will give the daughters of Zelophehad, whose father had died without having a son, direction in obtaining their inheritance.

Concerns were raised about what would happen with their land if one of the women chose to marry a man from another tribe. This would cause the inheritance to shift from the tribe of Manasseh to the tribe of their husbands and cause a redistribution of the land allocated to Manasseh. But God ruled that they could marry whomever they wished... as long as he was from their tribe. This rule ensured that the land would not be transferred to another tribe, and the women could be happily married and inherit property.

This may seem like a strange ending to this book, but God had a purpose. Again, we see that no matter who we are, “neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,” God loves us all the same, “for we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). He

cares for each of us equally. It doesn't matter what our gender is, our nationality, or our status in life. Each one of us is precious in His sight.

Conclusion:

In the book of Numbers, we've seen the continual stubbornness and foolishness of the people, and their failure to obey and serve God. But we've also seen the never-failing patience and faithfulness of God. We can be encouraged that, even when we fail, we can repent and have victory if we hold fast to our trust in God. The New Testament tells us, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (II Tim. 2:13 NKJV).

The first generation of Israelites had been slaves born and raised under the Egyptian culture. Freedom was quite a change of pace for them, but even though they witnessed God's miracles, they remained stuck in their ways. They didn't believe God was looking out for them because all they knew were pagan rituals.

The second generation was completely opposite. As children in Egypt, God's miracles were a big deal; they were a way of life for them, not an oddity. Even though they made mistakes and weren't perfect, they trusted in God's plan. They had the literal definition of "childlike faith." Their faith would allow them to experience God's blessings.

The first generation repeatedly proclaimed that they wanted to return to Egypt. Jesus will never go where He isn't wanted, and those who reject Him will never experience His blessings. Although Jesus came for all, He won't force Himself on people who are content with their unbelieving spiritual state.

The most dangerous thing we can do is rebel against God and go our own way. One of the hardest things we can do after we are saved is to persevere and continue to grow in our faith. The devil puts enticing things in our path that lure us away from what God wants for us, but obedience brings rewards. Just like God protected the Israelites in their battles, He will protect us in ours.

The Israelites were rewarded with the spoils of victory, and we are blessed when we walk in alignment with God's purpose for our lives. We are reminded that God is with us in our battles, providing abundantly when we obey and directing us to share the fruits of our victories. We can be assured that God will provide for us and lead us to triumph when we fight our battles with faith. The abundance we receive may not always be material blessings, but spiritual blessings, strengthened character, and a deeper relationship with God and others as a result of our faithful actions.

Where are you in your walk with God? Do you prefer to go your own way and miss out on His blessings? Are you rebelling against what His Word says is correct? Are you getting off the path or becoming stagnant in your growth? Determine what God wants from you and then press forward into the path. With God's guidance, you can become the person God wants you to be.

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended [taken hold of; achieved]: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

