

Numbers – Part 2

The Cloud is Lifted (Numbers 10-15)

In the Book of Numbers, we see the theme of trust developing—one of the hardest lessons that Israel and believers must learn. In our humanity, we tend to look for a solution to our problems instead of trusting that God's answers are always best. There is a real struggle to give God control, to trust that He knows what He's doing and doesn't make mistakes. We struggle to believe that everything He tells us in His Word is true and given for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Israel had enough faith to leave Egypt and follow God out of slavery, but they hadn't yet learned that liberty and rest only come after fully putting their faith and trust in Him. Israel had followed the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire; it wasn't that hard to do. They didn't know where they were headed, there were no roads to lead them anywhere, so God had to lead the way. Since they camped at Mt. Sinai and received the Law, they had been at a standstill. They hadn't gone anywhere!

God had commanded them to stay in place as long as the cloud remained on the Tabernacle. God had come into the presence of Israel in this cloud after the Tabernacle had been completed and had rested there. (Ex. 40:34-38). So here they were, nine months of staying in the same place and not getting any closer to the Promised Land!

Exactly one year had passed since they were released from Egypt. On the fourteenth day of that first month, they celebrated their first Passover in the wilderness of Sinai. (Nu. 9:1-5). How different the celebration was this time! (Ex. 12). They were no longer slaves. They had become a nation and were on their way to the land God had promised them—if they ever got moving again!

Two weeks later, God had Moses rearrange the whole camp. He separated the nation by tribes and set a prince over each one. It seemed to bring order to the chaos that had gripped them since they left Egypt. He then sanctified the Levites to help Aaron and his sons. A communication system using two silver trumpets was set up. If both trumpets blew, everyone had to assemble at the Tabernacle; if only one blew, only the princes came. A distinct cadence was blown for alarms. God had given a specific order to the tribes to take care of any problems that needed to be dealt with.

God had set Aaron's sons over the horn-blowing. Besides an alarm, they would blow them when there was a celebration, on feast days, and at the beginning of every month. Nineteen days ago, God organized Israel and now, He has lifted the cloud from the Tabernacle. (Nu. 10:11). They were moving! God will preserve them in their wandering, but they will walk through a desert of discipline.

I. Packed Up and Moving

God promised to give them guidance and victory in warfare. These are two critical needs as they march from Mount Sinai to the northern wilderness at the edge of the Promised Land. This trackless wilderness is a dark unknown, demanding the utmost trust and patience. Fierce, hostile tribes occupied the wilderness and would not hesitate to attack the slow-moving Israelites. Their hard labor as slaves had made the Israelites physically fit, but they were untrained in warfare.

With the arrangement of the camp setup, God had organized their protection. When they traveled, the same sequence was used to keep their best armies around the more vulnerable tribes and the Tabernacle. The Levites and Tabernacle would be protected in the middle since none of them were soldiers. As the cloud lifted, it was easy to see that God planned to lead them through the wilderness.

It was chaotic, especially with children running all about. Everyone scrambled to pack their belongings for easy transport. This would get easier as time went on. The priests and Levites were busy disassembling the Tabernacle, covering the furnishings so they could be carried, and fulfilling other personal tasks. Each person must find their tribe to find their place in the vast assembly of people. They must know their “pedigree” to be in their correct place in the camp. The Egyptians and others who were not Jewish would follow after the tribes, outside the wall of protection.

While the people packed, Moses approached his father-in-law Hobab (Jethro, Ex. 2:18). “We are journeying unto the place of which the LORD said, ‘I will give it you:’ Come with us, and we will do thee good: for the LORD hath spoken good concerning Israel.” Moses knew God would bless Israel, and if he came with them, he would, in turn, be blessed. But Hobab preferred to stay behind and remain with his family. (Nu. 10:29-32). Are we anxious for our unsaved family to join us in our walk of faith and receive God’s blessings too, or do we ignore our opportunities?

Once everyone was ready, it was time to move. Moses and Aaron gave the signal, and the silver trumpets blew. The family of Kohath moved the ark to the front to lead the way, but before they moved forward, Moses, not Aaron, prayed, “Rise up, LORD, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee.” When they stopped, Moses would again pray, “Return, O LORD, unto the many thousands of Israel.” And so, Israel began their journey into the wilderness of Paran.

The trumpet blew again, and Judah moved out with Issachar and Zebulun following, marching under Judah’s banner. Judah would lead the way because God had made him a leader just as his father Jacob had prophesied when he blessed his sons: Judah would “prevail over his brothers” and his “scepter would not depart from them” (Gen. 49:6-12).

After them came the clans of Gershon and Merari, carrying the various parts of the Tabernacle that were their responsibility. The trumpet sounded again, and Simeon, Gad, and Reuben under Reuben’s standard set out. The remainder of the Kohathites got in place after the next blast, carrying all the Tabernacle furniture, except the Ark that led the Israelites, on their shoulders. The furniture was made to hold shoulder poles, so nothing was touched or put on carts or wagons to transport. The trumpet continued to sound as each tribe fell into their place in line. Naphtali brought up the rear, so filled with joy “he used beautiful words” to give voice to Israel’s love and worship of God. (Gen. 49:21). Then, all the non-Jewish people fell in behind.

The Bible tells us that “The Ark of the Covenant of the LORD [God’s presence] *went before* them in the three days’ journey, to search out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the LORD *was upon* them by day when they went out of the camp” (Nu. 10:11-36). In some way, the Ark and the pillar of a cloud were connected because God led Israel through both things. Other instances show God using the Ark to lead Israel to cross the Jordan River (Josh. 3:14-17) and to march around Jericho before the

walls came tumbling down (Josh. 6:2-4). The pillar of cloud and pillar of fire had led Israel from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, but that was before the Ark had been made.

This first march toward their new home must have been momentous and yet formidable. With every step they took, God wanted them to know that He was with them. As they plunged into the broken, stony, barren wilderness, the Ark led them with God's supernatural direction, and the cloud loomed over their heads to keep the scorching sun from harming them as they marched to their place of rest. There was never a doubt that God was there!

The Israelites went three days through this barren region in the Wilderness of Paran before stopping. Although they pressed on as steadily as possible, it is unlikely they traveled more than thirty miles. Over such difficult terrain, a modern army, unhampered with families of young and old, sick and healthy, and all their livestock, would not be able to cover more than ten miles each day. Trying to keep the whole multitude together would have required supernatural aid and strength.

II. *Suffering Well*

Although God promised abundance when they arrived in the Promised Land, He had some things to teach them before they got there. Most of this group had probably been slaves in Egypt and thought that they were going to live a life of ease once they were free, but nothing seemed to bring them peace and contentment.

Three days. That's all it took. Three days after leaving Mt. Sinai the complaining began. "And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD: and the LORD heard it; and His anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burnt among them and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp." (Nu. 11:1-4). Notice where this complaining was coming from—those that had no place within the tribes of Israel. Day after day, they had eaten manna, and now they were tired of it. Instead of being thankful they had food in this barren place, they were unsatisfied with their circumstances. God was angry with them and consumed them by sending fire from heaven. Moses called the place Taberah because of the fire that punished their complaining.

Whenever you begin to complain about your circumstances, you are just one step away from rebellion because that's where rebellion begins. It starts with murmuring and complaining and soon turns into rebellion and willful disobedience against God. In the following few chapters of Numbers, we hear a lot of complaining! First, it begins when they are dissatisfied with their *circumstances*: their food was always the same, their water was short, and the wilderness was too hot and difficult to walk through comfortably. Nothing was right, even though God had supernaturally provided for them. All they could think of was Egypt—the land of bondage.

These people, many of whom were at least part Egyptian or foreigners who had been slaves, were torn between wanting to return to Egypt and the bountiful food they remembered or go forward with the Israelites to a land of plenty. In their mind, they couldn't justify what they really wanted to do—so they complained. It's like those who go to church on Sunday to salve their conscience, but the rest of the time, they run with the world—they can't decide which side of the fence they want to hang on, so they complain about the church because it's easier than getting rid of the world.

Much of what these people complained about was ridiculous to even contemplate in the middle of the desert. Fish, a common food staple in Egypt, was nowhere to be found in the desert, and the rest were mostly condiments. We can assume they had complained about constantly eating fish in Egypt, but now they lusted after it. “Our soul is dried away” because of the manna. God had never intended manna to be a long-term solution. If they had trusted Him, they would have only been living on manna for a short time until they would have feasted on the abundance of Canaan. But now they whined because they wanted meat to eat!

Not only was God angry, but their complaints also affected Moses. In Numbers 10:29, Moses had been upbeat, thinking, “The LORD has spoken good concerning Israel.” Even after the disgruntled complainers had angered God enough to send fire from heaven and destroy them, Moses could hear “Every man in the door of his tent” weeping for the same reason. (Nu. 11:10). By being loud and disagreeable, they emphasized how upset they were. They felt this would get Moses’ attention, and he would somehow fix their problem.

Instead, Moses became discouraged. He went to God and laid out all his woes. “Why are you afflicting me with these people? Are these my children? Why must I listen to all their grumbling and complaining? I can’t do this anymore. Just kill me already and be done with it!” (Nu. 11:11-15, pp.). But God had other plans. He chose seventy elders to share the burden with him. In addition, God would provide them meat to eat, not one day or two, not five, ten, or even twenty days. For an entire month, God gave them so much food, it felt like it was coming out of their noses. The meat soon became loathsome to them.

By the time Moses came back into camp with the elders, a wind had blown quails in from the Red Sea. They had fallen within a day’s journey all around the camp and fell in piles up to three feet high! This is the second time God provided Israel with quails after they complained (Ex. 16:13), but now they came in even larger quantities. The people gathered quails all day, all night, and all the next day.

The birds had flown far and were too tired to evade the people who were capturing them. The least amount anyone gathered was about 55 bushels full. They had no storage to keep them fresh, and there were too many to eat, so they spread them out to dry like they had done the fish in Egypt. They gorged themselves on the fresh quail until they were sick. Their stomachs had become used to the lighter, healthier manna, and it wasn’t prepared for such a heavy, solid meat diet.

But God wasn’t done with these ungrateful people. The more God provided, the more the people complained. He sent a great plague among them. So, while the people’s lust was fulfilled, they paid dearly for it. God had excused their murmuring the first time because they needed food, but this time, it was inexcusable. He had already provided plenty for them, but in their lustful desire, they craved meat. In the eyes of a holy God, their sin carried its own form of punishment.

The place was called Kibroth-hattaavah because that was where they buried the people who had lusted and complained. They journeyed from there to Hazeroth.

III. Jealous Siblings

After the people complained about God’s authority, Aaron and Miriam criticized their *leader’s authority*. They had a problem with Moses because his wife, Zipporah, was

Ethiopian. (Nu. 12:1-10). In other words, she wasn't a true Israelite like they were. The real cause for their complaint, though, was jealousy. God had spoken to Moses, and everyone recognized his position with God. But God had spoken to them too, so why didn't anyone pay attention to them? They were arrogant and tried to elevate themselves to a position they felt was worthy of them, "and the LORD heard it."

Notice the parentheses in Numbers 12:4. Moses' siblings may have looked at him as no better than they were, (after all, he was their baby brother so he couldn't have been *that* special!), but God recorded what He thought of Moses, "Now the man Moses was very meek." What a contrast! Moses didn't respond to their pettiness but kept on submitting to what God asked of him without any actions of pride.

But...God heard their words, and "came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the Tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam." Both the people complained, and then Moses complained. God responded positively to Moses and negatively to the people. Why? The people complained to one another, and nothing was accomplished. Moses took his complaint to God, who could solve any problem. God wants us to come to Him, not stir up others to whine and complain along with us!

So, like an angry parent, God responded to the people and told them, "If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make Myself known unto him in a vision and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, *who is faithful in all Mine house*, with him will I speak mouth to mouth." Then God departed from the Tabernacle, and suddenly Miriam was filled with leprosy, causing her to be white as snow!

Notice that Moses didn't point and say, "Serves you right. You've gotten what you deserve for badmouthing my wife." No, he cries to the Lord to "Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee." But her punishment wasn't complete; God wanted to publicly humble her for seven days to make a lasting impression. As a leper, she must be removed from the camp. (Nu. 5:1-3). After seven days, God did heal her as Moses had asked, and the cloud moved again. They left Hazeroth and traveled to the wilderness of Paran.

IV. *Doubting*

Not only did the Israelites murmur against their circumstances and their leader, but now they are murmuring *against the blessing God had promised them*. God told Moses to send twelve men, one ruler/leader from every tribe. (Nu. 13). God didn't need to have the land spied out—He already knew what it was like. He wanted them to show what their hearts were like, whether they trusted Him or not.

Moses sent them into the land to answer their questions: Was the land good or bad, productive or barren? Were the people strong or weak, few or many? Did they live in tents or fortified cities? Since it was time for the grape harvest, he also asked them to bring back some of the produce from the land. They had forty days to gather as much information as possible about this Promised Land. The spies traveled from Kadesh at the southernmost edge of the Desert of Zin to Rehob at the northmost edge and back, about 500 miles. (Israel is 263' x 71', about the size of New Jersey),

When the twelve men finally returned to the anxiously awaiting Israelites to present their report, they returned carrying a cluster of grapes that required two people to carry on a staff between them. They also brought pomegranates and figs. It was,

indeed, a land of plenty. It was very fruitful, just as God had told them, but there was one huge problem: the land was overrun by giants who lived in large, fortified cities.

By the time they finished their report, the people were beginning to catch the spirit of fear and defeat. Ten spies concluded that a conquest of the land was impossible. Even after years of waiting..., even after being right on the doorstep of Canaan..., even though God promised them victory over their enemies, they let their fears take over. Their fear of the giants was greater than their trust in God, so they refused the blessing He was eager to pour out upon them. Only Caleb and Joshua recommended that they go in and possess the land.

They even went so far as to try to take Moses and Aaron right out of the picture. They murmured, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt." If Joshua hadn't stood up to them and turned them back to what God desired, that's exactly what they would have done! And then, the Lord appeared in the Tabernacle again. He was willing to kill them with pestilence right on the spot and disinherit them, but Moses pleaded with God for them, and God gave them a different sentence. (Nu. 14).

Our God is forgiving and patient. Instead of killing them for refusing to obey, God kept them from entering the Promised Land. For each day they had taken to spy out the land, they would wander in the wilderness for one year. All those twenty years and older would perish without seeing the fulfillment of God's promise; the next generation would take possession. (Nu. 14:29-30). Only Joshua and Caleb, the two spies willing to trust God, would move forward to take possession.

Conclusion:

The real enemy that kept these people from inheriting the land was the sin of doubt, their lack of trust in God. They chose to trust the unbelieving spies' words that the people of Canaan were too strong and too big to defeat, rather than the truth of God's promises. But their biggest giant was that of "self." It wasn't the giants that lived in the land, but the person they saw reflected in the mirror every day.

Any great opportunity is bound to encounter opposition. Opportunities for success will always be met with giants, especially in our minds. Unbelief will keep us out of heaven. It robs us of the joy of the Lord and keeps us from receiving and enjoying God's blessings. Unbelief allows fear to paralyze us because it shrinks the omnipotent God's power down to our human strength. You can be sustained in the wilderness but will never be satisfied there; it will always be marked by a complaining heart.

The key to trust is learning that *Jesus' presence with us is enough*. When we learn this, the joy of the Lord becomes our strength. No matter what storms within the world beat against us, we can suffer well because God sustains us through it all. No matter how big an obstacle we face, He is enough! Until we are willing to come to the end of ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to take over and lead us, we will never fully experience the promises and blessings God wants to give us. So, how do we keep the presence of Jesus in front of us to help us remember?

1. Keep your soul satisfied by reading and studying His Word each day. (Col. 1:10)
2. Remember who you are in Christ (II Cor. 5:17)
3. Thank God daily for His provision (Eph. 5:20)
4. Let God wholly satisfy you by giving Him all your life, not just the parts you think you can spare!

5. Be joyful in the Lord, for “The joy of the Lord is our strength!” (Neh. 8:10)



Desert Wanderings (Numbers Part 3)

1) Read Numbers 16-21. What ultimately was the reason that Korah was upset with Moses. What three incorrect ways do you see that he approached Moses with his frustrations?

- a.
- b.
- c.

2) Read and compare his approach to what Jesus says should be done in Matthew 18:15-17.

3) In Numbers 16:31-35 we see God's response to the rebellion. Highlight the polysyndeton "and" that is repeated. Read these four verses aloud and accent the word "and" as you read. What impression of the actions does this give you?

4) What 4 separate rebellions do you see in Numbers 4? What was the result of each?

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

5) How were the Levites and priests supported by the people? (Nu. 18) What can we learn about giving from what was required for these people?

Conclusion:

Despite all that God had done for the Israelites, they never seemed happy. All they seem to do is complain. After 400 years of being enslaved to the Egyptians, God heard their cries and set them free. Within just a few days of freedom, all we've read about is how they complained about their food, their lack of water, their environment, their leaders, and everything else they could think of.

God gave them what they asked for and provided what they needed, but they wanted more. Beginning in Exodus and continuing through Numbers, there are at least 15 recorded accounts of the Israelites complaining since their release from captivity. Even though their time in Egypt was as a slave, they seemed to have forgotten the flogging and hard labor and can only focus on the food, rather than the goodness that God has provided.

But what about us? What is our focus? Or rather, what *should be* our focus? How about our eternal life? Aren't there wonderful things of creation that we see every day that can bring us joy and happiness rather than complaints? How about the fact that we have health, or a warm house, or a bed to sleep in, or Godly friends? Or the fact that God hears us just like He did the Israelites? Take time to make a list of things you can be thankful for. Cut them into slips of paper and put them in a jar. Each day, pull a slip out and praise God for it and focus on the goodness He provides rather than the things that make you feel like complaining!

When we let our emotions get the best of us, our sin nature takes over and God is not glorified. We need to remember to be content because none of us really should be complaining because we *need* something—God promises to supply that. Our complaints generally are because of something we *want*!

“Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith, to be content. I know both how to be abased [degraded, humiliated, lowered], and I know how to abound: everywhere, and in all things, I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need” (Phil. 4:11-12).