

Not All Who Wander are Lost  
The Book of Numbers

Genesis and Exodus are narrative books, telling Israel's story with teaching portions throughout each. Leviticus is a teaching book. Numbers returns us to a narrative format, telling the story of Israel's wilderness wanderings. And yet, from even the narrative portions of the Bible, we learn much.

*"These things took place,"* Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6, *"as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did."*

- Our name "Numbers" is a translation of Greek word, *Arithmoi*, from the Septuagint, titled because the book contains many statistics, population counts, tribal and priestly figures, and other numerical data.
- The Hebrew name comes from the first sentence of the book and means "*in the wilderness*" is a description of the Israelites wandering through the wilderness for 40 years.
- The events of the book began in the second year after the Israelites departed Egypt, as they camped at Mount Sinai around 1444 BC (Numbers 1:1).
- The journey should have taken about two weeks.
- But the narrative ends thirty-eight years later "in the plains of Moab by the Jordan opposite Jericho" and the Promised Land (36:13) in 1406 BC.

The Lord directed the message of Numbers toward the younger generation, children of the former slaves who escaped through the Red Sea. Except for Joshua, Caleb, and Moses, the older generation—everyone twenty years old or older at the time of the first census—died before the completion of Numbers, due to their disobedience and disbelief (Numbers 14:22–30). Moses completed the book before his death (Deuteronomy 31:24).

In this book, the people of Israel tested God's patience, and He in turn tested their endurance and faithfulness. Though the people failed many times, God showed His own faithfulness by His constant presence, providing for Israel in the wilderness and leading the way by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

The five major steps 'in the wilderness'

**First: Sinai – 1-10 –**

Several important things happened during this one-year stay at Sinai

- Received the Ten Commandments
- Built the Tabernacle
- Took a census

- Received directions for camping with the Tabernacle at the center and for travelling through the wilderness with the cloud by day (shade) or fire by night (heat) leading them

Why do we keep some of the OT laws and not the others?

- a) Civil laws – national government, behavior and punishments. These are not valid on the church because we are not Israel and are not a national entity.
- b) Ceremonial laws – Clean and unclean things and the sacrificial system. These are no longer valid because Jesus is the ultimate priest and final sacrifice.

The writer warned his Hebrew audience – There is no more sacrifice for sins (in the Temple) because Jesus was the ultimate and final sacrifice. If you go back to the Temple, you are “setting aside” Jesus and “trampling underfoot Jesus’s blood.” All you can expect, if you reject Jesus and return to the Temple is “a fearful expectation of judgement and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” because in doing so, you have “outraged the Spirit of grace.” (10:26-29).

### **ILL – Stamp – JESUS!**

- c) Moral laws – Ten Commandments that reflect God’s character

These are the laws that Jesus had in mind when he said, “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matt 5:17)

Jesus “ful-filled” these laws (think about last week’s jar being filled with Jesus’ righteousness that is given to you.

In spite of Calvary, the Jews continued to work up their own righteousness which is an impossibility. This is why Paul lamented,

*Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.<sup>2</sup> For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.<sup>3</sup> For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.<sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Romans 10:1-4).*

At the same time, we have been saved to keep the law as a reflection of God’s character. This is what made Israel and makes us a unique people in the world.

Works don’t save but salvation works.

Heidelberg Catechism #86 - **Question:** *Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?* **Answer:** *Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits, and He may be praised by us. Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.*

Romans 8:1-4 - *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,<sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

## Second: Travel – 10-21

After only three days of travel, the people begin to complain, and even Aaron and Miriam join the rebellion

## Third: Paran – 13-19

At Kadesh-Barnea, Moses sent 12 spies into the Promised Land.

- a) God was giving Israel the land. 13:1
- b) They brought back a good report of the land. 13:23 & 27
- c) They also returned with a ‘however...’. 13:28
- d) The majority opinion was that the land could not be taken. 13:31
- e) God told Moses he would destroy the people and start another nation. 14:11-12
- f) Moses interceded for God’s glory. 14:13-19
- g) God judged the people who rebelled. 14:20-23
- h) That disobedience turned the trip into a 40-year wandering. 14:25.
- i) Only Caleb and Joshua, who believed God, entered the Promised Land. 14:30
- j) Israel tried to take the land on their own strength. 14:39-45

In Deuteronomy, which Moses spoke after this event and just before Israel entered the Promised Land, he reminded them that God was giving them the land. As illustrated by the defeat at Kadesh-Barnea, they could not take the land.

- Remember the principle God is teaching

Ephesians 2:8 - *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

- Remember the purpose of the trip –

Exodus 19:4 - *You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

Which Jesus reiterated as –

*And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also (John 14:3).*

The goal of all redemption is the fulfilment of God’s original Edenic intent –

Revelation 21:3 - *Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.*”

## Fourth: Travel – 20-21

- a) Moses strikes the rock and is disqualified from entering the Promised Land.

Numbers 20:10-12 - *Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” <sup>11</sup> And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. <sup>12</sup> And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” (Repeated in Deut 32:51).*

You remember that ‘holy’ means ‘unique.’ When Moses said “*shall we bring water for you*”

You remember that holy means unique. When Moses said, *shall we bring water for you...* he denied God's uniqueness. Moses can no more get water from that rock than he can give Israel the Promised Land.

Again, and again, God is pointing Israel to his uniqueness. Why? The Egyptian gods could not save Egypt. Nor can our gods save us. There is only one God and God is righteous and faithful to repeatedly point us to himself as the only Savior.

b) God judges Israel's repeated disobedience with fiery snakes. 4b-9

Surely, some Israelites did not 'look and live' but chose to make home remedies. But what is God, once again, teaching the people? Only he saves. He's readying their/our hearts for only Jesus whose name means "*God is salvation.*"

(This biblical account of the rod and serpent predates the Rod of Asclepius and the caduceus, the rod of Hermes, as the traditional symbol of medicine and healing -

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4439707/>)

### **Fifth: Moab – 22-36**

How does Numbers end?

King Balak sent to Balaam, a Gentile true but wicked prophet, who lived in Mesopotamia along the Euphrates River (Numbers 22:5), and asked him to curse Israel in exchange for a reward. Balaam was apparently willing to do this but said he needed God's permission (verse 8). Balaam, of course, had no power, in himself, to curse Israel, but, if God were willing to curse Israel, Balaam would be rewarded through Balak. God told Balaam, "You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed" (verse 12). King Balak then sent "other officials, more numerous and more distinguished than the first" (verse 16), promising a handsome reward. This time God said, "Go with them, but do only what I tell you" (verse 20).

The next morning, Balaam saddled his donkey and left for Moab (Numbers 22:21). God sent an angel to oppose Balaam on the way. The donkey Balaam was riding could see the angel, but Balaam could not, and when the donkey three times moved to avoid the angel, Balaam was angry and beat the animal. "Then the Lord opened the donkey's mouth" (verse 28), and it rebuked the prophet for the beatings. "Then the Lord opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn" (verse 31). The angel told Balaam that he certainly would have killed Balaam had not the donkey spared his life. Ironically, a dumb beast had more wisdom than God's prophet. The angel then repeated to Balaam the instruction that he was only to speak what God told him to speak concerning the Hebrews (verses 33–35).

In Moab, King Balak took the prophet Balaam up to a high place called Bamoth Baal and told him to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:41). Balaam first offered fourteen sacrifices on seven altars and met with the Lord (Numbers 23:1–5). He then declared the message God gave him: a blessing on Israel: "How can I curse / those whom God has not cursed? / How can I denounce / those whom the Lord has not denounced?" (verse 8).

King Balak was upset that Balaam had pronounced a blessing on Israel rather than a curse, but he had him try again, this time from the top of Pisgah (Numbers 23:14). Balaam sacrificed another fourteen animals and met with the Lord. When he faced Israel, Balaam again spoke a blessing: "I have received a command to bless; / he has blessed, and I cannot change it" (verse 20).

Balaam's three prophecies of blessing on Israel infuriated the king of Moab, who told the prophet to go back home with no reward: "Now leave at once and go home! I said I would reward you handsomely, but the Lord has kept you from being rewarded" (Numbers 24:11). Before he left, Balaam reminded the king that he had said from the very beginning he could only say what God told him to say. Then he gave the king four more prophecies, gratis. In the fourth prophecy,

Balaam foretold of the Messiah: “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” (verse 17). Balaam’s seven prophecies were seven blessings on God’s people; it was God’s enemies who were cursed.

a) Balaam reiterated the Abrahamic Covenant of Gen 12:3

24: 9 - *Blessed are those who bless you and cursed are those who curse you.*

b) Balaam reiterated the first gospel – 24:17-19

Genesis 3:15 - *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”*

*I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near:  
a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;  
it shall crush the forehead of Moab  
and break down all the sons of Sheth.  
<sup>18</sup> Edom shall be dispossessed;  
Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed.  
Israel is doing valiantly.  
<sup>19</sup> And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion  
and destroy the survivors of cities!”*

Isn’t this one of the most moving prophecies of Jesus in the Old Testament? And to think, it is given by a Gentile!!!

While Israel is in the valley rebelling and soon to enter into an idolatry that will kill 24,000 Israelites, God is on the mountain speaking promises through a Gentile prophet. Think about the irony of God faithfulness in the midst of Israel’s unfaithfulness and of God speaking to Israel through a Gentile prophet – a forerunner of the church.

What’s the point for us?

1 Corinthians 10:1-14 - *For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. <sup>6</sup> Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup> Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” <sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. <sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, <sup>10</sup> nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. <sup>11</sup> Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. <sup>12</sup> Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. <sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.*

And what is idolatry? Any false savior.

## **Conclusion:**

*“These things took place,”* Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:6, *“as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.”*

Among other things, what we see in these passages is the exclusivity of a single Savior. There is indeed only one Savior. Reflections of him are seen throughout the OT. And this message is repeated again and again in the OT book of Numbers.

## **Community Groups:**

- 1 – What have you enjoyed the most about reading through the Bible?
- 2 – What benefits would you highlight to encourage a friend to read through the Bible?
- 3 – What difficulties might you make her or him aware of in reading through the Bible?
- 4 – Share your most important / influential takeaway so far?
- 5 – Why is Numbers called Numbers in both the Greek and the Hebrew?
- 6 – Recall the events that occurred at Sinai.
- 7 – What are the three types of law in the OT?
- 8 – Why do we keep only the moral laws of the OT?
- 9 – What happened at Kadesh-Barnea in Paran?
- 10 – What are some application points for us from Paran?
- 11 – Why was it wrong for Moses to strike the rock in Numbers?
- 12 – How did Moses offend God’s holiness at the rock?
- 13 – Retell the story of the incidents at Moab.
- 14 – What is the point of a Gentile blessing Israel?
- 15 – How is God’s faithfulness demonstrated in Balaam’s blessings?
- 16 – How does Paul use the wilderness wanderings to challenge the Corinthian church?
- 17 – Where have you seen Jesus in the book of Numbers?

