

# God and His People in the Wilderness

*Scripture Readings: Numbers 1:1; 14:28-30; 26:64-65; Hebrews 3:1-19 • Text: 1 Corinthians 10:1-11*

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We begin a new series today on the Book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Old Testament. But why is 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 the text when we are beginning a series on Numbers? We shall answer that question later, but for now let us look at some introductory matters about this book.

All the first five books of the Old Testament, called the Pentateuch, are attributed to Moses. Numbers 33:2 says that “*Moses wrote down*” [Israel’s] starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord.” The book was probably written after the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness around 1406 B.C. There are indicators of similar texts, customs, or artifacts from ancient places or periods close to this date.

The English title “Numbers” is borrowed from the name of the book in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where the title is “*Arithmoi*,” presumably because of the census accounts in chapters 1–4 and 26. However, the original Hebrew title is taken from the fifth word of the book, *bemidbar*, which means “in the wilderness.” This title is a better fit because the book is an account of Israel’s sojourning in the wilderness.

Similar to an epic, Numbers tells the story of Israel’s journey from Mount Sinai to the borders of the Promised Land, summarizing the first 40 years of the nation’s historical beginnings. The book begins with Israel’s final preparations to leave Sinai, the place where God made his covenant with them. With their sights set on Canaan, the people triumphantly set out, but soon after they started grumbling about their difficulties in the wilderness, provoking God into sending a series of disasters as judgment. Finally, when they reached the gates of Canaan, they were fearful of the inhabitants of the land and defied God’s command to conquer it. In response to this rebellion, God turned the Israelites back into the wilderness to delay the entry into Canaan by 40 years, a move designed by God to prevent all of the people who came out of Egypt – except for Joshua and Caleb – from entering the Promised Land.

Although the first 25 chapters of Numbers deal with the unbelief, rebellion and death of the first-generation Israelites, it is not an entirely gloomy historical record. By the end of the book, the people of Israel are on the verge of the Jordan River just before entering the Promised Land. They have defeated vaunted kings in the land east of the Jordan River and have taken possession of their enemies’ territories.

Certain themes are prominent in the book: (1) *fulfillment* – God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan; (2) *God’s presence* - in the

cloud of fire over the tabernacle, God accompanied his people in their wilderness wanderings; (3) *unbelief* – Israel’s repeated rebellion and unfaithfulness provoked God to severely punish them and delay their entry into the Promised Land; and (4) *hope* – in spite of their repeated violations of God’s commands, Israel is poised to enter the land at the end of the book.

But why study this book? It is full of numbers and names of people (Zelophehad) and places (Kibroth-hattaavah) that are hard to pronounce. It is overflowing with history, ceremonial laws, and stories of long ago, some of them ridiculous by modern standards, as in the anecdote about Balaam’s donkey. How would these stories relate to me? What is it to me that Israel had ancient ceremonial laws, Numbers 29:12-16 for example? If it is included in your list of books of the Bible for daily reading and meditation, you probably gloss over its contents, if not entirely skip it.

Again, why study the book of Numbers? First, as we have seen in all of our studies, the whole Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is the word of God. The Holy Spirit included this book in the canon of Scripture for a purpose, as Paul says, *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable...”* (2 Tim 3:16) Second, the whole Bible is about Christ, as he himself said to his disciples, *“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled”* (Luke 24:44).

Third, Paul says about the historical record in Numbers, *“Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction”* (1 Cor 10:11). We study history so we may emulate the heroes of the past and learn from past mistakes. Why study Israel’s past history? So *“we might not desire evil as they did”* (1 Cor 10:6). God gave us his revealed Word, Paul says elsewhere, in order that *“through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope”* (Rom 15:4). In the book of Numbers, we are warned, as the people of God, not only to avoid being disobedient like Israel in the wilderness, but are also encouraged to trust in God’s promises and persevere in hope to the end.

This brings us back to our text. Why do we begin our study of Numbers by looking at 1 Corinthians 10:1-11? It is because this text is a brief summary of the book of Numbers – of Israel’s 40 years of wanderings in the wilderness. Paul focuses on Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness, and warns us not to follow their example. But despite this rebellion, Paul writes about God’s mercy and love in leading, providing and caring for his people during those years.

Thus, Numbers is a study in contrasts: two generations – one rebellious, the other one faithful. Two outcomes – cursing in being unable to enter the Promised Land, and blessing in receiving God’s inheritance. Two mediators – Moses the lesser, and Christ the greater.

Our theme this afternoon, then, is **GOD AND HIS PEOPLE IN THE WILDERNESS:**

1. **Two Generations**
2. **Two Outcomes**
3. **Two Mediators**

## **Two Generations**

The most basic structure of Numbers is a division between the story of the first generation and the second generation. Chapters 1-25 narrate the first generation, led by Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Joshua and Caleb, who came out of Egypt. Chapters 26-36 tell the story of the second generation who were born during the 40 years in the desert and who entered the Promised Land under Joshua's command.

Why were Joshua and Caleb exempted from the curse of the first generation? Because they were the only two out of ten spies who trusted that God would give the Promised Land to them. These two generations are a study in contrast.

### *The Rebellious First Generation*

Paul describes how the first generation Israelites rebelled against God. In saying that they "desired evil" (verse 6), Paul was referring back to Numbers 11:4-6, where it is written that they "*had a strong craving*" for meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic back in Egypt, but loathed the manna that God gave them. So God rained quail on them, but he also struck them with a plague that killed many. And they were buried in a place called Kibroth-hattaavah, which means "graves of craving."

They were idolaters (verse 7), which refers to their worship of the golden calf, "*The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play*" (Exod 32:6). The Hebrew word for "play" implies sexual activity in pagan worship. They were "sexually immoral" (verse 8), which refers to Israel's men committing sexual immorality with pagan women of Moab, which led Israel into worshipping the pagan god Baal at a place aptly called Baal-peor. Because of this violation, about 24,000 men died (Num 25:9).

Not only were they idolaters and sexually immoral, but they were grumblers as well (verse 9). Throughout their wilderness travels, Israel continually grumbled about food and water and every other thing, preferring to go back to Egypt to be slaves again, "*And the people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food'*" (Num 21:5-6).

Because of these repeated rebellion against God's mercy, love and provision, Paul says of Israel, *"Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness"* (1 Cor 10:4). But despite the repeated disobedience of the first generation, God fulfilled his promise to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. A second generation of faithful Israelites was born in the wilderness, and they received God's promised inheritance.

### *The Obedient Second Generation*

As the first generation died one by one in the wilderness, a second generation of Israelites started to emerge. At the end of the book, Aaron and Miriam had already died, and Moses was in the last few days of his life. From those who came out of Egypt, only two - Joshua and Caleb - were to enter the Promised Land. These two were typical of the faithful second generation, the only ones who trusted God to give them the land.

Another example of this faithful second generation is the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-7). Zelophehad was one of the first generation who had died in the wilderness. He had no sons, but had five daughters, so he had no heirs. Even while the Israelites were still outside of the Promised Land, they asked Moses for an inheritance for their children. They trusted in God that he would give the land to them, and when they settle in the land, they and their families should be given an inheritance. So Moses rewarded their faith and trust by promising land for their children.

In this world, you are in your wilderness wanderings. Your goal is to reach your promised heavenly city, whose designer and builder is God. When you go through temptations, economic hardship, troubled relationships, sickness and sorrow, do you see only your present situation? Or do you look back to all the wondrous works that God has done for you in the past? How he has saved you from slavery to sin; how he has provided for you and your family when times were hard; how he has given you reconciliation with your loved ones when differences seemed irreconcilable.

Do you continue to focus on God's promise that he works all things for your good? That the sufferings in this present age are nothing compared with the glory that awaits us in the age to come? When you lose sight of God's promise to be with you in this barren wilderness of life till the end of the age, you will end up bitter and rebellious like those first-generation Israelites in the wilderness.

Always focus on God's wondrous works for you in the past and on his promises of spiritual blessings in the heavenly places today and tomorrow. The book of Numbers has two very different outcomes for those who are faithful to the end, and those who rebel in this present age.

### Two Outcomes

Paul summarizes the bitter and tragic outcome of the first generation's repeated rebellion against God, *"with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness"* (1 Cor 10:5). They all perished in the wilderness; all were buried in the desert. As God promised, they were not able to enter the Promised Land of rest: *"As I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest'"* (Heb 3:11). God swore that they will have no inheritance in the land, *"None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers"* (Num 14:22-23).

Because of their rebellion, most of this book tells us about God's severe judgment on them in their wanderings in the wilderness. The first 25 chapters tell the story of unbelief, rebellion, despair and death of the first generation, because they refused to place their trust in the Lord who had done marvelous wonders for them in Egypt and in the wilderness. In contrast, chapters 27-36 begin and end with the story of the faith of the daughters of Zelophehad in God's promised inheritance. Their faith was evidence that they were ready to enter the land that God was giving them.

The book of Numbers then consists of the contrasting attitudes and deeds of two consecutive generations with two contrasting outcomes: a generation of unbelief that leads to the curse of death in the wilderness, and a generation of faith that will lead to the blessing of life in the Promised Land.

Do you see from this book where you are headed when life finally ends? Do not think that being an active member of the covenant community, the visible church, guarantees your entrance into the heavenly city promised by God. The only guarantee to God's inheritance is by believing and trusting in Christ alone, the only mediator between God and man, a better mediator than Moses. Without faith in Christ, God will never be pleased with you, and there will be no expectation of an eternal inheritance, but only a burial place in this earthly wilderness.

## Two Mediators

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, Paul tells us about how God cared for his people during their wilderness years. He provided a mediator for them, Moses, who led them out of slavery in Egypt. When they crossed the sea on dry ground, they were all united (“baptized”) into Moses. Through Moses, God gave them drink from the rock when they were thirsty in the dry desert. Through Moses, God rained manna and quail on them when they were hungry in the barren desert.

Paul says that there is another mediator, greater than Moses. It is Christ, our spiritual food and spiritual drink. Jesus is the spiritual manna from heaven, *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”* (John 6:51). Jesus is the spiritual drink from the Rock: *“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life”* (John 4:13-14). This spiritual Rock followed them in the wilderness; he was always with them, even when they were disobedient.

This is why Paul says that when the people grumbled against God, they grumbled against Christ, *“We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did”* (1 Cor 10:9). And Jude 5 affirms that Christ was the one who redeemed his people from Egypt, *“Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe.”* Thus Christ is also the “Destroyer” that Paul says destroyed the rebellious people in the wilderness! (1 Cor 10:10) This is the same “Destroyer” sent by Yahweh who executed God's judgment on Egypt's firstborns during the exodus (Exod 12:23; Heb 11:28).

And as Israel was “baptized into Moses” in their exodus from Egypt, so are all believers like you, Jews and Gentiles alike, “baptized into Christ” in his death and resurrection (Rom 6:3; Col 2:12). But unlike God's rebellious people in the wilderness, in being united to Christ, you have put on Christ (Gal 3:27), in order that you will *“make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”* (Rom 13:14). Union with Christ means that you are not to be idolaters whose priorities in life are money and all kinds of material possessions. It means that you are not to commit sexual immorality, whether you are single, married, separated or divorced. It means that you are not to grumble against God in difficult situations, but to be satisfied and *“thank[ful] in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”* (1 Thess 5:18).

While Moses is the mediator of the old covenant between God and his people Israel, Christ is the better mediator of a better, new covenant between God and his people – Jews and Gentiles alike - the true Israel of God.

### **Conclusion**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Like the Israelites in the wilderness, you are God's people living in today's dry and barren wilderness, full of thorns and thistles along the way. You have been redeemed from you slavery to sin by a better mediator of a better covenant. But, like the people in the book of Numbers, you are still waiting to enter your Promised Land, the heavenly city, where our food and drink and light is Christ our Passover Lamb.

You are pilgrims and strangers living in this barren land, living between redemption and the Promised Land. But as God's people, *"you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God"* (Eph 2:19). And as you await your final redemption, you are *"to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul"* (1 Pet 2:11).

And how are you to lead holy lives in this wilderness journey? As the hymn writer says, let Christ, *"the fire and cloudy pillar,"* lead [you] all [your] journey through." Let Jesus, the *"strong Deliverer,* be still [your] Strength and Shield." *AMEN.*