

The Book of Numbers

Background and Introduction

The structure of this book is divided into two sections. Each section begins with a census of the 12 tribes, hence the name "Numbers." The first census is of the wicked and unfaithful first generation of exodus Israelites. The second census is of the holy, zealous, faithful second generation of exodus Israelites. The structure of the book is as follows:

1. First Generation (Numbers 1:1-25:18)
2. Second Generation (Numbers 26:1-36:13)

The theological theme of Numbers is to show how God refines His Nation to demonstrate His Holiness to them and the world.

This book was designed to teach the 2nd generation of the Exodus Israelites about God's holiness. The book picks up where Leviticus leaves off by instructing how they were to display God's holiness. It then records how Israel failed and how God refined the nation to be more holy through trials and discipline. Through this, Israel learned that God is serious about holiness, and He requires complete obedience. Israel was supposed to know this and to live this out for the entire world around them. This book was also meant to highlight God's faithfulness to Israel. Despite their failures and disobedience, He was faithful in raising a second generation to fulfill His promises to Abraham.

These same lessons about God's holiness, His requirement for His people to be holy and obedient, and His faithfulness also apply to us today. Numbers establishes that the obedience and holiness of God's people are to be tested and refined in the wilderness. We see this later in 1 Samuel when David undergoes a series of tests in the wilderness, and after failing these tests, he becomes more and more refined and dependent on following the direction of YHWH. Centuries later, the nation of Israel is again sent into the wilderness when they are taken into the Exile. Their Exile has not yet ended, and the prophets tell of how, one day, they will be led out by the Messiah, who will make them holy. In Matthew 4, we see that Jesus is taken into the wilderness to be tested. Unlike David, Israel, and Moses before Him, He remained holy and obedient during His wilderness testing. This perseverance showed that He is the better Moses, the more excellent David, and the perfectly righteous representation of His people.

Lastly, in 1 Peter, the apostle calls the saints exiles. This name connects the church with the people of Israel who are still in Exile, being refined by God through trials, tests, and persecution that He allows so that His people may become more holy.

God's faithfulness to preserve His people in the wilderness should give hope to saints who are being tested today. Also, the obedience, zeal, and holiness of the second generation of exodus Israelites should be an example to saints today of how they must live as exiles with a zealous love and devotion to our God.

I. First Generation (Numbers 1:1-25:18)

General Overview

The main point of this section is to show how Israel was to display God's holiness in how they traveled.

It is important to remember that this large group (over 600,000 men alone) of people was moving about in foreign lands and that these foreign lands had spies who would be evaluating and observing the habits and actions of Israel.

1. Preparation to Depart to the Promised Land (Num 1:1-10:36)

A. First Census (1:1-54)

This book opens with a census, not for tax purposes but for conquest. Vs. 20,

Numbers 1:20: "20 Now the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their genealogical registration by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, head by head, **every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever was able to go out to war,**"

In verse 46, you can read that the total number of these fighting men was 603,550. What a striking difference in number compared to the 70 individuals who left the Promised Land during the famine to be saved by Joseph. In this seemingly mundane account of population numbers, we should see God fulfilling His promise to Abraham. Lastly, note the response of the people to Moses' instruction vs. 54,

Numbers 1:54: "54 Thus the sons of Israel did; **according to all which Yahweh had commanded Moses, so they did.**"

Complete obedience. This refrain will be repeated at the end of the first four chapters of this book.

B. Arrangement of Camps (2:1-34)

In Chapter 2, we have the arrangement of the camp, which had one distinct feature, 2:2,

Numbers 2:2: "2 The sons of Israel shall camp, each by his standard, with the banners of their fathers' households; **they shall camp around the tent of meeting at a distance.**"

The king and generals were always at the center of Ancient Near Eastern battle formations. Similarly, the rest of the tribes followed the lead of the Tabernacle. When the Tabernacle set out, they set out. When they stopped to camp, they stopped to camp.

This arrangement demonstrated to Israel and the world that their KING was YHWH, the Creator of the universe.

C. Spiritual Preparation of the Community (3:1-9:14)

i. Instructions for The Tribe of Levi (3:1-4:49)

In Chapter 3, we have the establishment of the Aaronic priesthood and the division of the tribe of Levi. Priests were to come from the line of Aaron. All the other members of the tribe were still considered holy to God and were given responsibilities regarding the upkeep and guard of the Tabernacle. In verse 8, we see interesting language describing the job of the tribe of Levi,

Numbers 3:8: "8 They shall also **keep all the furnishings** of the tent of meeting, along with the responsibility of the sons of Israel, **to minister at the Tabernacle.**"

The Hebrew words "keep" and "minister" were first used in Genesis 2 to describe Adam's job in the garden.

Genesis 2:15: "15 Then Yahweh God took the man and set him in the garden of Eden to **cultivate it and keep it.**"

The Levites, and more specifically the priests, were to cultivate and keep the Tabernacle, which was the place where God dwelled with man and whose design explicitly pointed back to Eden.

The priests were also charged with guarding the entrance into the Tabernacle and preventing anyone from entering - verse 38,

Numbers 3:38: "38 Now those who were to camp before the tabernacle eastward, before the tent of meeting toward the sunrise, are **Moses and Aaron and his sons, keeping the responsibility of the sanctuary for the responsibility of the sons of Israel; but the outsider coming near was to be put to death.**"

Like the Seraphim guarding the entrance into the garden, the priests were to guard the entrance into God's tent, acting as a buffer between God's perfect holiness and His people's imperfection.

ii. The Purity of the Camp (5:1-31)

This chapter emphasizes the camp's requirement for purity and holiness as they move towards the Promised Land. These commands reiterate the laws of clean and unclean found in Leviticus. The unclean were to follow these laws by remaining outside the camp as they moved throughout the wilderness - verse 2,

Numbers 5:2-3: "2 Command the sons of Israel that they send away from the camp every leper and everyone having a discharge and everyone who is unclean because of a dead person. **3 "You shall send away both male and female; you shall send them outside the camp so that they will not defile their camp where I dwell in their midst."**

Remember that this demonstrated dedication and love for God as Israel followed His preferences for cleanliness. This dedication would have also been an odd site for the spies of the other nations as they observed the leper and the unclean leaving the camp and remaining outside until they were made clean.

In verses 11-31, we find instructions dealing with the accusation of adultery. An intentional connection is drawn here between holiness before God and holiness within the marital relationship. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel's sin of idolatry is described in terms of adultery, of spiritual adultery. Purity within marriage was severe, and protecting the marriage covenant was instrumental to preserving the holiness of the entire nation before their Holy God, who dwelled amongst them.

iii. The Nazarite Vow (6:1-21)

In chapter 6, we find the Nazarite Vow. This vow was made to God in which a person could demonstrate their total dedication to Him. The Nazarites were to intentionally set themselves apart by abstaining from alcohol, using a razor, and contacting the unclean. This vow could be kept for a short period up to an entire lifetime. Here again, we have another visible demonstration of dedication and holiness toward the Holy God who dwelled amongst them.

iv. The High Priestly Blessing and the Consecration of the Tabernacle (6:22-7:89)

As the mediator between God and His people, Aaron was given the privilege of pronouncing God's blessing on the people before the Tabernacle was consecrated - verse 24,

Numbers 6:24-26: **"24 Yahweh bless you, and keep you; 25 Yahweh make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; 26 Yahweh lift His face on you, And give you peace."**

This blessing is rich in connection to God's previous actions toward His people. The blessing of YHWH was first seen in Genesis 2 when God blessed creation and then blessed Adam and Eve upon the consummation of their marriage. This blessing is His natural disposition toward His creation and to His people, to bless them. Aaron also invokes the keeping of God. Again, this alludes to Genesis 2, as we saw with the duties of the priest, where God instructed Adam to keep and cultivate the garden. So, too, is Aaron requesting that God sustain and cultivate His people. Aaron then asks for God's face to shine upon the people, which should make us think of Moses's face shown after communing with God at Sinai and in the Tabernacle.

[Biblical Theology Connection](#)

David picks up on this theme in Psalm 34.

Ps 34:5: "5 **They looked to Him and were radiant,** And their faces will never be humiliated."

Paul also connects to this idea in 2 Corinthians to describe the reality of being transformed by glorious communion with God.

2 Corinthians 3:18: "18 But we all, **with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord,** are being **transformed into the same image from glory to glory,** just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

The shining of God's face and the experience of communion with God then lead to the receiving of grace and peace from Him. This is the end game of how Israel was to travel and how they were to live.

v. The Cleansing of the Levites and Celebrating Passover (8:1-9:14)

In chapter 8, we see the Levites purified and consecrated for their tasks as priests and attendants of the Tabernacle of God. Here, we see that the Levites were given to God as an offering. From the beginning, their entire existence was to be one of dedication to God.

Then God instructs Moses on how the second Passover, since leaving Egypt was celebrated. The Passover is crucial to Israel's life, for in doing so, they must regularly remember the salvation of the Lord. Those who did not observe the Passover, even those who were unclean, were to be cut off from the covenant people of God.

After one year, Israel departed Sinai, celebrating that God would complete what He started in Egypt and bring them into the Promised Land.

D. Final Instructions and the First Departure (9:15-10:36)

Here, at the end of chapter 9, we go back to the event of the Tabernacle being erected. This event was recorded in Exodus 40. In Exodus, this event emphasized God's presence amongst His people. The glory of YHWH that accompanied His presence was so great that not even Moses could enter the Tabernacle. The emphasis was on the immense power, magnificence, and intensity of God's presence amongst His people. Even though the same event is described in Numbers, the emphasis is slightly different. Verse 16,

Numbers 9:16–18: "16 So it was continuously; the cloud would cover it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. 17 Now whenever the cloud would go up from over the tent, afterward the sons of Israel would then set out; and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the sons of Israel would camp. **18 At the command of Yahweh the sons of Israel would set out, and at the command of Yahweh they would camp; as long as the cloud settled over the Tabernacle, they remained camped.**"

What is evident by the refrain that is repeated seven times in this chapter, "at the command of the Lord," is that God is their Leader and King. Israel was to follow His command for when to set up camp and when to pack things up and begin moving.

2. Preparation in Journeying to the Promised Land (Num 11:1-25:18)

A. Dealing with the Complainers (11:1-35)

Sadly, almost immediately after leaving Sinai, the people complain about eating manna from heaven, longing for the pleasures they had before the Exodus. Verse 5,

Numbers 11:5–6: "5 **"We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt,** the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, 6 but now our appetite is dried up. There is **nothing at all to look at except this manna."**

This complaint causes Moses to join the pity party. Verse 11,

Numbers 11:11: "11 So Moses said to Yahweh, "Why have You allowed this evil toward Your slave? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me?...14 **"I alone am not able to carry all this people because it is too heavy for me.** 15 "So if You are going to deal thus with me, **please kill me at once,** if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness."

Moses is irritated that God has made him the leader of such a wretched people, and he has no idea where in the wilderness he will find meat to feed the people. It's as if the people, the rabble, and Moses all forgot what God had done in Egypt and what God had done in the wilderness before Sinai.

Even after God tells Moses that He will provide meat for an entire month, Moses is filled with doubt and does not see how God will do so for 600,000 fighting men. Listen to God's reply in verse 23,

Numbers 11:23: "23 And Yahweh said to Moses, **"Is Yahweh's power limited? Now you shall see whether My word will happen for you or not."**

Has the right hand of YHWH, which delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the sea on dry ground, reduced in power and ability? Absolutely not. God can and will provide.

God then graciously answered Moses' complaint of bearing the burden of leading this people alone. Moses was to gather the 70 elders together so that God would anoint them with the Holy Spirit so that they could assist Moses with leading the people. Verse 25,

Numbers 11:25: "25 Then Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and **He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the seventy**

elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again."

Because Moses' authority was derived from God, the portioning out of the Holy Spirit to the other elders signified that they were an extension of that God-given authority. The Spirit enabled those leaders to assist Moses in giving oversight and supervision to the people.

But two ordinary men in the camp also received this anointing, Eldad and Medad. The Spirit rested on them, and they began prophesying. When Moses hears the report, Joshua declares that Eldad and Medad must be stopped. But listen to Moses' response, verse 29,

Numbers 11:29: "29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? **Would that all the people of Yahweh were prophets, that Yahweh would put His Spirit upon them!**"

Biblical Theology Connection

When Moses received word that this had happened, he longed for the Holy Spirit to be placed on God's people. The fulfillment of this longing is prophesied by Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, and then again by the prophets Joel, Zechariah, and Ezekiel.

Ezekiel spoke thus in

Ezekiel 36,

Ezekiel 36:27: "27 **"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes,** and you will be careful to do My judgments."

Listen to the prophecy of Joel,

Joel 2:28: "And it will be afterwards That **I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind;** And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy; Your old men will dream dreams; Your young men will see visions."

And, on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2, Peter declared that this prophecy had begun to be fulfilled in the church that received the Holy Spirit that day. Each believer has received this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, promised in the New Covenant purchased by the blood of Christ. Think of this: Moses longed to see a day like today.

B. Dealing with the Insubordinate (12:1-16)

In chapter 11, we saw the people rebel and complain against God, and we saw that even Moses fell into a moment of doubt and unbelief. Here in chapter 12, we see Miriam and her High Priest brother complain and rebel as well,

Numbers 12:1–2: "1 Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken as a wife (for he had taken a Cushite woman); 2 and they said, **"Has Yahweh indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"** And Yahweh heard it."

The rebellion is against Moses' position as leader and sole revelatory mediator between God and His people. And upon hearing Miriam's complaint, God summons all three of them to the Tabernacle - verse 5,

Numbers 12:5–8: "5 Then Yahweh came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. And then both came forward, 6 and He said, "Hear now My words: **If there is a prophet among you, I, Yahweh, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.** I shall speak with him in a dream. 7 "Not so, with My servant Moses, **He is faithful in all My household; 8 With him I speak mouth to mouth,** Indeed clearly, and not in riddles, **And he beholds the form of Yahweh. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant, against Moses?"**

With His servant Moses, God speaks with him face to face. And all of Israel should have had fear speaking out against his authority for as mediator, Moses was the direct representative of YHWH - speaking against him equaled speaking against YHWH.

C. Refinement at Kadesh Barnea (13:1-19:22)

i. The False Report and the People's Unbelief (13:1-14:10)

Upon arriving at Paran, at the southernmost boundary of the Promised Land, spies were sent into the Land of Canaan. In verse 27, they give their report,

Numbers 13:27–28: "27 Thus they recounted to him and said, "We went in to the Land where you sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 28 "Nevertheless, **the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there.**"

God promised to deliver them from Egypt, and He did. God declared that He would return them to the Land that He swore to Abraham, and here they are filled with unbelief and spread this unbelief to the people. Chapter 14:1,

Numbers 14:1–4: "1 Then all the congregation **lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night.** 2 And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "**Would that we had died in the Land of Egypt!** Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 "And **why is Yahweh bringing us into this Land, to fall by the sword?** Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" 4 So they said to one another, "**Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.**"

Their unbelief is so rampant that they have convinced themselves that God brought them out of Egypt just to kill them. They based their fear and unbelief on their desire to protect their children, and they accuse God of attempted genocide. Then, they devise a plan to find a leader to reverse the Exodus and return them to Egypt, an anti-Moses.

However, two spies, Caleb and Joshua, stood up to implore the people to enter the Land immediately. Verse 7,

Numbers 14:7–9: "7 and they spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, "The Land which we passed through to spy out is an **exceedingly good land**. 8 "If Yahweh is pleased with us, then **He will bring us into this Land and give it to us**—a land which flows with milk and honey. 9 "But as for you, only **do not rebel against Yahweh; and do not fear the people of the Land, for they are our bread**. Their protection has been removed from them, and **Yahweh is with us; do not fear them.**"

Joshua, a descendant of Ephraim, who was the chosen son of Joseph, and Caleb, a descendant of the royal tribe of Judah, remained faithful to YHWH. They remembered God's promises and knew that God would give them victory. Their faith leads them to attempt to convince Israel to trust in YHWH and fear Him instead of the Canaanites. But the people had nothing of this message and took up stones to kill Caleb and Joshua, foreshadowing the murderous actions of God's people toward His faithful prophets.

ii. The People's Great Rebellion (14:11-45)

As the people were preparing to murder Moses, God's glory descended upon the Tabernacle, and God declared His just judgment to Moses. Verse 12,

Numbers 14:12: "12 **"I will strike them with pestilence and dispossess them,** and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they."

However, as he did in Exodus 32, Moses intercedes on behalf of the people as their mediator, pleading for mercy based on the glory of the name of YHWH. Verse 13,

Numbers 14:13–16: "13 But Moses said to Yahweh, **"Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your power You brought up this people from their midst,** 14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this Land. They have heard that You, O Yahweh, are in the midst of this people, for You, O Yahweh, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. 15 **"Now if You put this people to death as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, 16 'Because Yahweh was not able** to bring this people into the land which He swore to them, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness."

And then Moses intercedes based on God's character, which He revealed to Moses when He showed His glory to Moses. Verse 18,

Numbers 14:18–19: "18 **"Yahweh is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression;** but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' 19 **"Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness,** just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."

From his intercession in Exodus 32, Moses knew that God's lovingkindness - His grace - was the basis on which He could pardon their iniquity. And just as in Exodus, God listens to the intercession of Moses and does not exercise His just wrath of killing the entire nation of Israel right then and there. However, Israel's rebellion does not go unpunished. God demonstrated His glory and power to them when He delivered them from Egypt, and yet they defamed His name by doubting Him and fearing the Canaanites instead of Him. So then, for the sake of His glory, God decreed that this first generation would die in the wilderness. Only the faithful spies, Caleb and Joshua, were to be allowed to enter the promised Land.

Sadly, upon hearing Moses' pronouncement of God's judgment, the people changed their minds. They are filled with newfound courage and declare they will enter the promised Land to conquer the Canaanites. But Moses warns them, verse 42,

Numbers 14:42: 42 "**Do not go up, for Yahweh is not among you**, so that you are not defeated before your enemies."

Before, they feared for their lives even though God dwelled among them. But now they are so self-assured that they can be victorious without the presence of God that they go into battle without God, resulting in humiliating defeat.

iii. Instructions for the Promised Land (15:1-41)

Amid their rebellion, we glimpse God's faithfulness and grace. He gives Moses instructions about offerings and ceremonies for **when they come into the Land**. Even while they were under judgment, God still planned to accomplish His promises. God does not say, "If you come into the land." He declares, "When you come into the land..."

iv. Dealing with the rebellious (16:1-50)

But immediately after this, we encounter another rebellion. Within the tribe of Levi, there were three clans. They were the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Kohathites. The Kohathites were the clan that Moses and Aaron descended from, and only Aaron's descendants were ordained by God to be Priests.

Even so, the Kohathites were the most honored of the three families, for they were responsible for caring for and transporting the holy things of the Tabernacle. However, for them, this honor was not enough. The Kohathite, Korah, desired to be like his cousin Aaron, so he assembled a mutiny of Levites and Reubenites. Chapter 16:3,

Numbers 16:3: "3 Then they assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "**You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and Yahweh is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves** above the assembly of Yahweh?"

Moses calls the rebels to stand before him and Aaron at the Tabernacle to test who the Lord has chosen to be: the priests and leaders of His people. 250 Kohathites arrive and are given censures for incense along with the High Priest, Aaron. Korah arrives at the entrance to the Tabernacle with the entire assembly of Israel behind him for this showdown. When they arrive, God declares that the entire nation of rebels should be consumed instantly.

But as he did in Exodus 32 and Numbers 11, 12, and 14, Moses intercedes for the congregation and pleads that they would not be punished for Korah's sin. The Lord hears the intercession of Moses and instructs the entire congregation of Israel to separate themselves from the 250 rebels and stand with Moses and Aaron. Then the Lord judged in verse 31,

Numbers 16:31–35: "31 And it happened that as he finished speaking all these words, **the ground that was under them split open**; 32 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions...**35 Fire also came forth from Yahweh and consumed the 250 men who were bringing near the incense.**"

The very next day after this event, the people rose to blame Moses and Aaron for the death of Korah and his rebels, intending to murder them. At that moment, God judged the people with a terrible plague, causing people to perish as the plague moved through the camp instantly. This plague prompted Moses to instruct Aaron to act as Priest. Aaron was to run through the midst of the camp with incense burning from his censer. The incense symbolized Moses and Aaron's intercessory prayer on behalf of the people, which stopped the plague from affecting the entire camp. On that day, 14,700 disobedient Israelites died.

v. Reaffirming the Priesthood (17:1-19:22)

Following the rebellion of Korah, God reaffirms His choice of Aaron. All the staffs of the chiefs of the 12 tribes were placed in the Tabernacle. In verse 8, God demonstrates His choice,

Numbers 17:8: "8 Now it happened on the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony; and behold, **the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted** and put forth buds and produced flowers, and it bore ripe almonds."

This divine demonstration caused all the people to be filled with fear for their rebellious actions against God's anointed.

After this, God established the cleansing ritual that was to be continually available to the people after they cared for the thousands of dead who died in the plague and for the millions more who would die in the wilderness. An unblemished, red cow was to be taken outside the camp by the Priest to be slaughtered and burned along with cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn. The ashes of this sacrifice were gathered and

mixed with water. This Water of Impurity was then to be used to cleanse those who touched the dead. Chapter 19:11,

Numbers 19:11–12: "11 'The one who touches the corpse of any person shall be unclean for seven days. 12 **'That one shall purify himself from uncleanness with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, and then he will be clean;** but if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.

This whole process would have been a reminder of the unholiness and uncleanness of the first generation of Exodus Israelites. After caring for the dead, the second-generation Israelites had to perform this ritual to be made clean again. The red hair of the cow and the red yarn that is added to the fire for the ceremony may be a visual association with that which cleanses: *blood*.

Christ Connection

This whole ceremony finds its end in Christ, as the author of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 9,

Hebrews 9:13–14: "13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will **the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"**

How much more does Christ cleanse us? His cleansing water is the living water that washes away the stain of our sins, our dead works, and our filthy rags so that we might be made clean so that we might be holy and serve the living God as a holy priesthood.

D. Refinement on the Way to Moab (20:1-21:35)

i. Dealing with Failed Leadership (20:1-29)

After almost 40 years of wandering, Israel returned to Kadesh Barnea, where they first complained against God in Numbers 11 and believed the ten spies' bad report in Numbers 14. Throughout the wilderness wandering, we have seen the failure of the people and the failure of the Levites, and here, we see the failure of Moses.

The chapter begins with the death of Miriam, the sister of Moses, and ends with the death of Aaron, the brother of Moses. These two deaths are bookends to Moses' sin. The story begins again with the people grumbling about the lack of water. This situation almost repeats Israel's first complaint after being led through the Red Sea in Exodus 17. In that instance, we saw that the people were filled with unbelief and did not trust God to provide them with water. God then commanded Moses to go to the base of Sinai and strike the rock, which God Himself had stood before with his staff, causing water to flow from the rock.

But here in Numbers 20, Moses receives a different instruction. Verse 8, Numbers 20:8: "8 "Take the rod, and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation **and speak to the rock before their eyes**, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink."

But when Moses arrives at the rock, he condemns the people for their rebellion and then *strikes* it. In doing so, he joined them in their rebellion against God. Forty years previously, in this very place, the Israelites did not believe in the promise of God by not entering the promised Land. In verse 12, we see God reveal Moses' sin of the same unbelief,

Numbers 20:12: "12 But Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, "**Because you did not believe Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel**, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Because of his sin, Moses was barred from entering the Promised Land.

ii. Dealing with the Impatient (21:1-9)

In chapter 21, we begin to see a difference in the character of the Second Generation. When the Canaanite King of Araad attacks the camp and takes hostages, the people pray to God. Chapter 21:2

Numbers 21:2–3: "2 So Israel made a vow to Yahweh and said, "**If You will indeed give this people into my hand, then I will devote their cities to destruction.**" 3 **Then Yahweh heard the voice of Israel and gave the Canaanites over**, so they devoted them and their cities to destruction. Thus the name of the place was called Hormah."

Interestingly, this first victory came at Hormah, which was the very place where Israel experienced their humiliating defeat when they entered battle without the presence of God and Moses.

However, just as we are tempted to celebrate this new attitude of trust, we are reminded of the unbelieving heart that still exists. When the nation of Edom blocked the Israelites from crossing through their Land, Israel was forced to travel around them. Since Edom was the nation of Esau, Israel could not conquer them. The people were then filled with impatience and unbelief, complaining once more against God for bringing them out of the comforts of Egypt to die. And once again, God punishes Israel for their complaining unbelief by sending fiery serpents amongst the camp, bring death upon all who were bit. The text does not differentiate between the two generations here. But what is significant is that when God sends the plague of snakes amongst the people, some come to Moses, confess their sins against YHWH, and plead for mercy. And God responds by providing a way for their salvation. Verse 8,

Numbers 21:8–9: "8 Then Yahweh said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a standard; it will be that **everyone who is bitten and looks at it will live.**" 9 And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it happened, that if a serpent bit any man, **when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.**" The people responded with faith by looking at the serpent raised on a pole and being saved from the serpents.

Christ Connection

In John 3, Jesus uses this story to illustrate,

John 3:14-15"14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, **so must the Son of Man be lifted up,15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**"

As John MacArthur says in his commentary on John, "*The stricken Israelites were cured by obediently looking apart from any works or righteousness of their own in hope and dependence on God's word at the elevated bronze serpent. In the same way, whoever looks in faith alone to the crucified Christ will be cured from sin's deadly bite and will in Him have eternal life.*"

iii. Deliverance from Wilderness (21:10-35)

As Israel continued to travel towards the promised Land and the Jordan River, God continued to provide for them, causing wells to spring forth amid the desert. When the mighty Ammonite king, Sihon, rises to oppose Israel from crossing through his Land, God grants them victory. After both events, Israel responds to God with worship and praise.

As Israel continued to move towards Canaan and experience victory after victory, the surrounding nations would have noticed that those who opposed them were quickly defeated by the God of the Israelites, to whom they sang praises. When the mighty King Og brought his army to battle with Israel, God spoke to His people saying, Chapter 21:34

Numbers 21:34: "**...Do not fear him,** for I have given him into your hand, and all his people and his land; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon, king of the Amorites, who lived at Heshbon."

And so the people responded,

Numbers 21:35: "35 **So they struck down him and his sons and all his people,** until there was no survivor remaining for him; **and they possessed his Land.**"

What we are beginning to see is that this second generation is a people of faith, a people who trust God to provide and trust God to fight for them.

E. Deliverance from Moab's Spiritual Attack (22:1-24:25)

i. Balak Summons Balaam (22:1-37)

In chapter 22, The King of the Moabites, Balak, fears what the Israelites will do when they come to Moab, so he sends for a renowned Seer and prophet of the Canaanite gods, Balaam¹. Balak wanted Balaam to practice his magic and conjure a curse against the Israelites, and he was willing to pay Balaam handsomely for his services. Balaam responds to the King's request, saying he will bring the word of YHWH to Balak's servants. But that night, God comes to Balaam. God initiates contact. He is not some instrument to make Balaam rich. He is in charge, verse 12,

Numbers 22:12: "12 And God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, **for they are blessed.**"

Notice that God does not speak to Him as YHWH, Balaam's covenant God, but Elohim. God also does not permit Balaam's request to curse His people, for they are *blessed*. YHWH promised blessing to Abraham in Genesis. To violate this promise by cursing them at the request of a Moabite would have broken His unbreakable covenant.

So then Balaam sent the men away at the command of God. However, shortly after, Balak's servants return with a sweeter deal. After Balaam refuses their request, God speaks to him again that night,

Numbers 22:20: "20 And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "**If the men have come to call you**, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do."

However, when dawn broke the next day, Balaam did not do all God commanded. He gets up first thing in the morning, and instead of waiting for the men to call on him, he packs up and saddles his donkey. Because of this heart of greed and lack of attention to God's instructions, God's anger was kindled against him. Verse 22,

Numbers 22:22: "22 But **God was angry because he was going, so the Angel of Yahweh took his stand in the way** as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey, and his two young men were with him."

The last time we saw the Angel of the Lord block the path of an adversary was with Pharaoh at the Red Sea. The intention of Balak, King of Moab, was to curse the people who left Egypt so that they would return to subjected, pitiful, weak, and enslaved people. The Angel of the Lord enters the scene again to intervene against those who seek to curse His people. Verse 24,

Numbers 22:24–27: "24 Then the Angel of Yahweh stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. **25 And the donkey saw the Angel of Yahweh**, and it pressed itself to the wall and pressed Balaam's foot

¹ In 1967, inscriptions were discovered at an archeological site called Tel Deir' Alla that mention Balaam the Seer. They tell of Balaam receiving visions of an impending war of the gods of the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan. This region is the exact place in which the Israelites find themselves encamped.

against the wall, so he struck it again. 26 And the angel of Yahweh passed on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no way to turn to the right hand or the left. 27 **Then the donkey saw the Angel of Yahweh** and lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and struck the donkey with his stick."

Indeed, the astute and famous prophet and magician would have seen the signs here. But he couldn't see what his donkey could: the Angel of the Lord standing in His way. Balaam was the mouthpiece of the gods, but here, in this instance, God demonstrated his dominion over His creation by opening the mouth of a donkey. Verse 28,

Numbers 22:28–29: "28 And **Yahweh opened the mouth of the donkey**, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" 29 Then Balaam said to the donkey, "Because **you have made a mockery of me!** If there had been a sword in my hand, I would have killed you by now."

God then opened the *Seer's* blind eyes to see, filling him with the fear of God. Verse 34, Numbers 22:34–35: "34 And Balaam said to the Angel of Yahweh, "**I have sinned**, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. So now, **if it is evil in your sight, I will turn back.**" 35 But the Angel of Yahweh said to Balaam, "**Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you.**" So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak."

The message is clear — *follow My instructions down to the very letter, for I am the ruler of creation — I am the God who can even make a donkey see and speak.*

ii. Balaam's First Oracle (22:37-23:12)

After encountering the presence of the Angel of YHWH, Balaam arrives in the presence of Balak, declaring to the king that he must only speak the words that God puts in his mouth. Balaam receives the first oracle from God in 23:8,

Numbers 23:8–10: "8 "**How shall I curse whom God has not cursed?** And how can I denounce whom Yahweh has not denounced? 9 "For I see him from the top of the rocks, And I look at him from the hills; Behold, a people who dwells alone, And will not be reckoned among the nations. 10 "**Who can number the dust of Jacob, Or count the fourth part of Israel?** Let me die the death of the upright, And let my end be like his!"

In this first oracle, God declares that foreign nations cannot curse Israel. They are the seed of Abraham to whom God promised blessing and Abraham an "offspring as the dust of the earth" (Genesis 13:16). God was unconditionally bound by His covenant faithfulness to fulfill what He pledged to Abraham. He will not curse His people at someone else's request.

iii. Balaam's Second Oracle (23:13-23:26)

Unsurprisingly, King Balak was displeased with Balaam's oracle for Israel. However, he gives him a second chance. In Balaam's second oracle, God declares that what He says, He will do, for He is sovereign. Verse 19,

Numbers 23:19–21: "19 "God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not establish it? 20 "Behold, I have received a command to bless; When He has blessed, then I cannot revoke it. 21 "He has not observed misfortune in Jacob; Nor has He seen trouble in Israel; **Yahweh his God is with him, And the shout of a king is among them.**"

*This oracle teaches a crucial truth you must devote to memory: **God is not a liar.** He will always be faithful to carry out what He promises. When we look at the last 21 chapters, we would not blame God for moving on from Israel, for utterly destroying them for their disobedience and unbelief. However, God is not like us. He does not go back on His promises or change His mind. God will mercifully forgive Israel of their sin and will not devote them to utter misfortune and abandonment. He informs Balak and the nations that He is their King who is among them.*

iv. Balaam's Third Oracle (23:27-24:9)

Balak foolishly thought that maybe if he took Balaam to a different mountain, he would be able to curse Israel - as if a change in scenery could force God to change his mind.

After a short hike, God speaks through Balaam a third time in 24:3,

Numbers 24:5–9: "5 **How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! 6 "Like valleys that stretch out, Like gardens beside the river, Like aloes planted by Yahweh, Like cedars beside the waters.** 7 "Water will flow from his buckets, And his seed will be by many waters, And **his King shall be lifted up higher than Agag, And his kingdom shall be exalted.** 8 "God brings him out of Egypt, He is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He will devour the nations who are his adversaries, And will gnaw their bones in pieces, And shatter them with his arrows. 9 "He **crouches, he lies down as a lion, And as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, And cursed is everyone who curses you.**"

In this oracle, God again declares the glorious future of Israel to Balak. Notice how God uses Edenic imagery and wording from Genesis 1 and 2, palm groves, gardens, rivers, aloes, and cedars, to describe the future dwelling places of Israel in the promised Land. The message is this: **God plans to restore the Garden of Eden in the Land of His people.**

God also promised a king who would be more powerful than the kings of the Amalekites. They were the most prominent and powerful of the desert tribes of Canaan, but Israel's King would be above them. God also promised to bring this King out of

Egypt. The prophet Hosea alludes to this when he makes his Messianic prophecy in Hosea 11,

Hosea 11:1: "When Israel *was* a youth I loved him, And **out of Egypt I called My son.**"

Lastly, look back to verse 9 and see that this King will "***lay down like a lion and like a lioness; who will rouse him up?***" This is a direct quote from Jacob's prophecy of Judah's seed in Genesis 49

Genesis 49:9: "**Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him?**"

God is here introducing the nations to the coming King of Israel. Then Balaam proclaims that the nations will be blessed for blessing the King and cursed for cursing Him when He comes to rule and reign. This is a direct quote from the Abrahamic covenant given in Genesis 12.

v. Balaam's Final Oracle (24:10-25)

Balaam's 4th and final oracle builds on the Messianic message of the previous oracle. God introduces this oracle in verse 14,

Numbers 24:14: "14 "So now, behold, I am going to my people; come, and **I will advise you what this people will do to your people in the last days.**"

This oracle will focus on what will happen in the latter days. This verse is the 2nd use of the term *latter days*, and the first time this phrase was used was in Genesis 49:1 when Jacob prophesies the future of his 12 sons. This phrase refers to the culmination of all history and the time in which all promises made to God's people will be fulfilled.

Balaam's oracle begins in verse 17,

Numbers 24:17: "17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; **A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab,** And tear down all the sons of Sheth."

The prophecy begins with Balaam seeing the coming King, who is like a star. In the ancient Near East, rising stars were used to herald the coming of a mighty king. This prophecy was not merely a metaphor for the birth of the King that the sign of a star accompanied Balaam prophecies of, Matthew 2,

Matthew 2:1–2: "1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 2 **"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."**

Not only will this King be like a star, He will be like a ruling scepter. Again, this is a reference to Genesis 49, this time in verse 10,

Genesis 49:10: "**The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,**"

Moreover, notice how this King shall crush the head of Moab. This crushing is a direct allusion to the *proto euangelion* of Genesis 3

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

This promise was made of the 2nd Adam, the one who will destroy all the enemies of God, including the devil himself. Then, in verse 19, we find another allusion back to the 1st Adam,

Numbers 24:19: "19 And one from Jacob **shall have dominion**, And will make the survivor perish from the city."

This word for dominion has not been used since Genesis 1:28, which is where God blessed Adam and granted him dominion over all creation.

The oracle then ends with the prophecies of the destruction of the Canaanite nations, predicting the conquest of the Promised Land that this King will accomplish.

David, who conquers all the nations listed in this oracle, alludes heavily back to Balaam when writing Psalm 110,

Psalm 110:2-6: "2 Yahweh will stretch forth Your **strong scepter** from Zion, saying, "**Have dominion in the midst of Your enemies.**" 3 Your people will offer themselves freely in the day of Your power; In the splendor of holiness, from the womb of the dawn, The dew of Your youthfulness will be Yours. **4 Yahweh has sworn and will not change His mind**, "You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek." 5 The Lord is at Your right hand; **He will crush kings** in the day of His anger. 6 He will render justice among the nations, He will fill them with corpses, **He will crush the head that is over the wide earth.**"

To review, Numbers 23-24 establishes that **the King of Israel will arise like a star. He will be the descendant of Judah. He will be the New Adam who will fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15 and the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Lastly, He will conquer and subdue all of Israel's enemies under His dominion.**

F. Dealing with Apostates (25:1-18)

But before we think that Balaam is now some gentile version of the prophet Isaiah, we come to Numbers 25. Look at verse 1,

Numbers 25:1-3: "1 And Israel remained at Shittim, and the people began to **play the harlot with the daughters of Moab.** 2 **Indeed they called the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.** 3 **So Israel joined themselves to Baal** of Peor, and the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel."

Later in Numbers 31, we learn that Balaam advised Balak at Baal Peor to send the Moabite women into the camp to seduce the Israelites into adultery, thus causing the people to bring a curse upon themselves.

Here, we see a repeat of the debauchery of the golden calf incident at Sinai. Remember that just after receiving the glorious covenant from God and the Ten Commandments, Israel "rose up to play" as they worshipped the cow. Now, after hearing of God's glorious plans for the future of Israel, the scene quickly shifts to the men of Israel committing adultery with the harlots of Moab and Midian, who seduced them and then led them into idolatry. At last, the first generation of Exodus Israelites sink to rock bottom. They doubted God. They disbelieve God. They complained against God. But, here we see them turn their backs on God to worship the idols of the Moabites and Midianites. Moses writes that they played the harlot. Using the analogy of a marriage, Israel wasn't just abusing their husband. They were committing adultery against him right after He declared the most glorious promises of love and hope for their future.

In response, God executed His final judgment of the first generation, sending a plague upon them. A plague that, if unchecked, would destroy the entire nation. But, in verse 4, God provides a way for the curse to end,

Numbers 25:4: "4 And Yahweh said to Moses, **"Take all who are the heads of the people and hang them in broad daylight before Yahweh, so that the burning anger of Yahweh may turn away from Israel."**

God instructed Moses to take the leaders of each tribe and hang them on the tree. These chiefs were the tribal elders. However, when the people under them turned to spiritual adultery instead of holiness, they were held responsible. In this, we see that in God's economy of justice, the sins of the people demand the hanging of the leaders who represent them. Death by hanging was painful, shameful, and public. In that culture, people were hung by the method of impaling. And as the leaders were hung, God's wrath was appeased.

After this public execution of the leaders, Moses and the people mourn the sin of their brethren before the Tabernacle. However, in verse 6, they are interrupted by a wicked intrusion,

Numbers 25:6–8: "6 Then behold, one of the sons of Israel came and brought near to his brothers a Midianite woman, in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, while they were weeping at the doorway of the tent of meeting. 7 And Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the Priest, saw it, **so he arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand, 8 and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and**

pierced both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman, through the body. **Then the plague on the sons of Israel was checked.**"

This brazen and shameful act caused Phineas, the grandson of Aaron and the son of the high Priest, Eleazar, to rise and *pierce* the sinners with a spear. After this final execution, God removed the plague from the congregation. Moses records that 24,000 people died because of the plague that God had sent, and this provides a final parallel to the sin of the golden calf, which resulted in the death of 23,000 Israelites.

Because of Phineas' zeal for the Lord, he and his descendants were promised a perpetual priesthood, verse 10,

Numbers 25:11–13: "11 "**Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the Priest, has turned away My wrath** from the sons of Israel in that he was jealous with My jealousy among them so that I did not consume the sons of Israel in My jealousy. 12 "Therefore say, **'Behold, I give him My covenant of peace; 13 and it shall be for him and his seed after him, a covenant of a perpetual priesthood**, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the sons of Israel."

His jealousy for God and his zeal for the holiness of God demonstrates a markedly different attitude towards God than we have seen in the first generation of Israelites. The priestly piercing turned away the wrath of God.

Christ Connection

It is important to recognize that the sin of Baal Peor establishes the foundation for the appeasement of God's wrath and the removal of plague (curse). As we saw, the leaders of the people were hung as punishment for the people's sins. Furthermore, we saw the curse of the plague was removed by piercing the sinners. In Deuteronomy 21:23, we read that **"a hanged man is cursed by God."** David builds on this theology in the Royal Suffering Song of Psalm 22, where He foretells the piercing of the King's hands and feet. God curses a hanged man. Christ quoted on the cross when He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Isaiah also adds to this theme in the Song of the Suffering Servant, found in Isaiah 53. Listen to verse 5,

Isaiah 53:5: "5 But **He was pierced through for our transgressions**, He was crushed for our iniquities; **The chastening for our peace fell upon Him**, And by His wounds we are healed."

Then, in Galatians 3, we see Paul bring this all together when he wrote,

Galatians 3:13: **"13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."**

Like the elders at Baal Peor, Christ was hung on a tree as punishment for our sins. He bore the curse of God that belonged to us so that we could be redeemed from the curses of breaking God's Law. Like Zimri, He was pierced with a spear. But He was not

pierced for His sin, for He was sinless. Instead, **he was pierced for our transgressions**. And one day, as Zechariah prophesies, the nation of Israel will behold the King they rejected as He returns with His heavenly hosts to judge the world, save His people, and establish His earthly kingdom. In that Day God declares, Zechariah 12, Zechariah 12:10: "10 "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so **that they will look on Me whom they have pierced**; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn."