

## Introduction to Numbers

The book of Numbers, story of Israel's travels, has many applications for us, but in this era of many group mission trips it is striking how applicable it can be:

- Numbers 1-4      Have a well organized group with a focus on Christ
- Numbers 5-6      Keep short accounts for any conflicts that arise
- Numbers 7-10     Daily acknowledge God's protection and guidance
- Numbers 11      Be appreciative and don't complain about the food
- Numbers 12      Be respectful and appreciative of the leaders
- Numbers 13      Take on assigned tasks even when challenging
- Numbers 14      Don't grumble and think your tasks are too difficult
- Numbers 15      Ask for forgiveness for any failures within the group
- Numbers 16      If some are critical and rebellious, stay out of it
- Numbers 17      Look to leaders who are life-giving
- Numbers 18      Expect provision for service and be generous
- Numbers 19      Continually turn to Christ for purification
- Numbers 20      Expect Christ to keep you stable even in uncertainty
- Numbers 21      Don't complain, and expect spiritual victories
- Numbers 22-23    Expect God's blessing even when there is opposition
- Numbers 24      Look for signs of God at work in unlikely places
- Numbers 25      Oppose sin that arises in the group
- Numbers 26-27    Keep the goal of the group and its work in mind
- Numbers 28-29    Offer your life daily as a living sacrifice
- Numbers 30      Have integrity and do what you say you will do
- Numbers 31      Keep your commitment to Christ pure and wholehearted
- Numbers 32-33    Keep a journal of your journey
- Numbers 34-36    Keep the long view that there are unmet goals to be reached, and it is a privilege to be a small part of moving ahead

**Organizing the people — Numbers 1-4, Ephesians 2:20**



*Marc Chagall, Tapestry in the Knesset*

In this book the people of Israel journey toward their new land, and their journey has parallels to Christ's constant journeys during his ministry, as well as to our spiritual journeys with him today. All three are journeys that take place in community. Christ organized twelve followers. In this portion of Numbers twelve tribes of Israel were counted, assigned a location in the camp, and given a marching sequence. This book is full of administrative details (boring!), but the concepts of layered leadership helps us to this day. Today we use tables, and the New Living Translation does that.

The census at the start of the journey is matched by a census after 40 years in the desert toward the end of the book, hence the name "Numbers". At this point there were over 600,000 grown men who could be warriors, and an additional over 22,000 who were dedicated specifically to serve God and the people. Of those, a special 2,750 did the most sacred duties. We have similar ratios in congregation, ministry workers, and a more limited number of pastors and teachers.

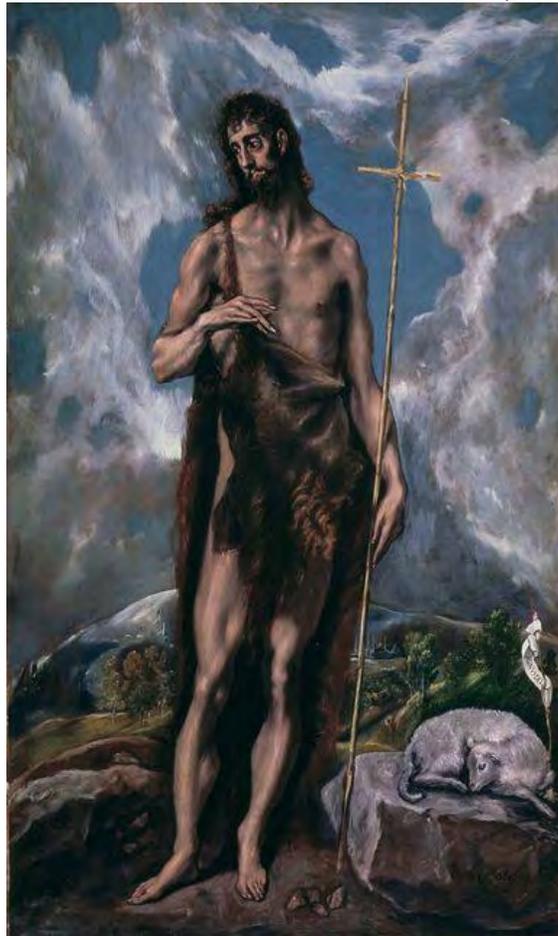
The tabernacle, centrally located, had Levites close at hand to care for it. In the midst of the details, we see Christ. Levites are called "substitutes" for the firstborn

who belong to God, and their cattle are substitutes as well. But because there were 273 more firstborn than Levites, they were bought with a “redemption price.” Christ is our substitute, a holy replacement for us, paying the redemption price, liberating us from death.

While each aspect of the tabernacle symbolized Christ, as each piece was carried, they were wrapped in cloths that symbolized him as well: blue for holiness, scarlet for blood, and goat skins for sacrifice. The other tribes surrounded this sacred center with one tribe on each side serving as leader for a march. Tribes marched under their flags and one can imagine a festive and joyful crowd, feeling a part of something grand. God is with us in our grand journey today.

*Am I willing to do my part to keep my Christian community well-organized with Christ clearly at the center?*

### **Repentance and Reconciliation— Numbers 5-6, Philippians 1:10-11**



*El Greco, Saint John the Baptist*

Our journey with Christ requires a process of purification and dealing with conflicts in our community. The keys are the same today: confession and restitution when

we wrong another person. “If any of the people--men or women--betray the Lord by doing wrong to another person, they are guilty. They must confess their sin and make full restitution.” Uncovering a secret sin such as suspected adultery involved asking God to show the truth. We rely on him to reveal innocence or guilt today as well. A drink made from sacred things is unlikely to be our method. Hopefully though, the outcome would be reconciliation as the fears and jealousy of the spouse would be assuaged.

The Nazarite vow, a commitment to holiness, was externally noted by long hair and abstention from alcohol. John the Baptist demonstrated this ascetic approach to spirituality, whereas Christ engaged in society. Christ affirmed both ways of being devoted to God by his own engagement in the world, and by lauding John’s asceticism.

Leprosy and death symbolized sin and impurity that had to be quarantined from the people as a whole. Christ came and welcomed lepers and healed them, touched the dead and raised them to life. Christ did not condemn the adulteress but forgave her sin and pointed out the hypocrisy of her accusers. His work of overcoming the prescribed exclusion is prefigured in Numbers. When Miriam became a leper she was healed and included. After committing adultery with Moabite and Midianite women, the offenders returned to the community. Those defiled by the dead could not celebrate Passover, but the solution was to celebrate later.

The community made whole can receive the blessing, protection, approval, grace, favor, and peace that God gives to his people. God is with us in keeping our community at peace.

*Like Christ, do I welcome others into community where there is healing, forgiveness, and resurrected life?*

**Organizing a Worshipping Journey — Numbers 7-10, II Corinthians 9:7**



*Motty Mendelovitz, Pillar of Fire*

Our journey with Christ cannot avoid the mundane. The practical, financial side of maintaining a worship community, of keeping the lights on, of having a staff, a recruitment and retirement program, and managing scheduling conflicts explained here contrasts with Christ's lack of formality and preoccupation with funds. Chapter 7 is read during Hanukkah, a time of giving gifts, a portion each day. The twelve tribes bring the same thirty-five gifts, repeatedly itemized, reinforcing a spirit of giving. There is validity in both formal fundraising and financial simplicity, and our giving to God is a privilege.

God beautifully promised to journey with them in a cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. When it moved, it was the signal for the people to move, and the alert came in the form of trumpet calls. As they started their march as an organized people, they set out with flags waving. It reminds us that God accompanies us and leads us through life today. The guidance from the pillar of cloud meant they stayed a few days, overnight, two days, a month, or a year. Am I this flexible, responsive, and obedient to God's guidance?

There are numerous lines of encouragement in these chapters for Christian leaders. Moses was told to receive the gifts and distribute them for the work. Whenever he went into the sanctuary he heard God's voice. He and Aaron dedicated the Levites

as a special offering to God. And there is the strong theme that they are following God's directions in their journey: moving on occurs seven times, marching six times, setting out twice, and travel twice. Our communities need to have a similar sense of being directed in our journey with God.

It's left ambiguous as to whether they had Moses' brother-in-law as a down-to-earth guide. Human and divine guidance working together still applies to us as does Moses' ritual of expecting protection from (spiritual) enemies as we set out on journeys, and claiming God's presence with our community when we are at rest. These have helped me for both metaphorical and literal journeys. God is with us as we follow him.

*Am I willing to be part of the financial aspects of maintaining community? Am I part of listening for where God is taking our community?*

### **Complaints about Food — Numbers 11, Philippians 4:11-12**



*James Tissot, The Gathering of the Manna*

Our journey with Christ calls us to live with a humble and grateful heart. The people of God were called to live in contentment, and in this chapter they were discontent with their food, wanting to return to slavery for tasty meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leek, onions and garlic. Manna was boring.

God responded emotionally to them, first in anger, and later in forgiveness. In human relationships, anger is a natural response to feeling we are being unfairly accused or criticized, and God showed a very human reaction in his relationship with his people.

Their complaints about hardships resulted in fire on the camp's outskirts which killed no one. The people cried out, Moses prayed, and the fire went out. The response to complaints about meat resulted in quail, but many died from food-poisoning, called here a plague. Remembering that there were ten judgments on Egypt, it seems that there was balance in judging the disobedience of Israel: ten judgments for complaints and rebellion of which this was one.

When on journeys the food we're offered might be unfamiliar or repetitive, but learning grace to appreciate what is available and trusting God's provision is important, particularly in cross-cultural settings. It is an ever-present temptation to think that we deserve something better from God and to become like the Israelites—whiney, unrealistic about the past, discontent, anxious about the future. A healthy antidote whenever we notice this bad attitude notice things for which to be grateful. God calls us to contentment.

*Is the general tenor of my life one of contentment and gratitude?*

### **Complaints about Leadership — Numbers 12, I Timothy 5:17**



Our journey with Christ calls us to acknowledge with gratitude the spiritual leaders in our lives. The people of God were called to respect their spiritual leaders, as are we. In this instance, Moses' siblings could not see why he had a special role and complained. God reinforced his support for Moses by Miriam's leprosy which was healed when she repented.

God wants us to have the same compassion Moses exhibited toward his sister. Rather than reproaching her for her actions, telling her the illness was her own fault, he simply cried out to God for her healing. Christ did not tell us to criticize the sick, blame them for not having enough faith or not having forgiven another, but rather he told us to pray for them and visit them. Moses demonstrated compassionate leadership in seeking healing for the very one who had opposed his leadership.

That it was Moses' prayer for Miriam to which God responded with healing reminds us how essential our intercession can be for those who are ill. This miracle looks ahead to Christ's many healings of lepers, addressing the most incurable diseases of the time. Our incurable diseases are different today, but crying out for healing still applies.

God asked Aaron and Miriam why they weren't afraid to criticize Moses. While it is human nature to criticize those with power and to be discontent with their decisions, we are called to have a truly respectful attitude, and to be supportive of our spiritual leaders.

God affirmed Moses by saying "I speak to him face to face." Today each Christian is promised the same intimate communication that Moses had. We are in a remarkable time to have this privilege. We also need Moses' humility so that we don't overstep and act inappropriately sharing what we have heard in our private prayer. God calls us to compassion.

*Is my intimacy with God something that builds humility and compassion in me?*

**Scouting out the Land — Numbers 13, Acts 7:5**



*Nicolas Poussin, Autumn (The Spies with the Grapes of the Promised Land)*

Our journey with Christ calls us to be courageous and willing to be bold in following in whatever direction he is calling us. The people of God were called to take action to fulfill the promises of God, as are we. The land had been promised to them through Abraham and the time had come to carry out this plan which was part of preparing for Christ's coming. Moses sent scouts to see what the land was like, wanting to be prepared to lead the people wisely.

Joshua already stands out. Moses had changed his name from Hoshea, meaning "salvation" to Joshua, meaning "the Lord is salvation". He thus becomes a figure of Christ, leading the others to explore what is to be their inheritance.

They were not troubled by questions of the morality of taking the land, something that has happened over and over through history. This became a 40 day exploration, almost like tourism. They saw it was productive land with large cities. Their difficulty was that the people in the land seemed huge and intimidating. Rather than allowing their sense of weakness to turn them toward asking for God's help, they simply promoted negativity.

We too may turn back from our calling and consequently wander through life, experience correction, and have to let aspects of our lives die. but the story is not over and even if the path is difficult, God will reach his goals for us. He'll put us where we might have arrived more easily in obedience. Like Joshua and Caleb we should not be discouraged, but rather maintain our faith that the dream is possible. Because of their faith, they did eventually enter the land, unlike their more fearful companions. We can say with Caleb, "we can conquer!" God calls us to have courage.

*Am I courageous or easily intimidated when it comes to God's calling? Am I willing to take risks?*

### **Grumbling vs. Faith — Numbers 14, Philippians 2:14-15**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, The Return of the Prodigal*

Our journey with Christ calls us to face any challenges and endure any hardships with good cheer. Joshua foreshadows both Christ's leadership and is an example of willingness to do what is difficult. He did not resist God's will but still endured the longer journey caused by the disobedience of others. Joshua's example encourages us when affected by wrongdoing of others, and like him, we can reach God's goals for us.

It also calls us to repent when we have made wrong choices. When the time came to invade Canaan they wailed all night wishing they'd died. God threatened death, but relented at Moses' plea. The tragedy that ensued did not mean God withdrew his promises or his presence. However, he imposed consequences—the immediate deaths of the ten discouraged spies, a year of wandering for each day of the 40 that scouts had entered the land, and death for everyone over 20 without entrance to the land. This is the central crisis of the book, the turn on which everything changes and a short journey becomes a long journey ending in the death of those who had experienced the liberation from Egypt. We see that God strongly rejected their fearfulness.

Moses foreshadows Christ's mercy to those who deserve judgment. God expressed anger at the complaining, rebellious people, but he responded to Moses' appeals for mercy. God had liberated them, provided for them, given them leadership, and offered them a new land, when they did not appreciate these things, he demanded justice. Moses appealed for mercy.

The people had God's glorious presence journeying with them, and had seen miracles. These gifts made their faithlessness and disobedience even more terrible. But are we not often like them, holding back in fear, and forgetting that God is with us in every challenge? Grumbling undermines faith, and these stories teach us to silence our complaints or to ask for mercy when we fail. Christ challenges us to expect good things and to respond with patience when things go wrong. God's exasperation at their inability to trust him and appreciate what he had done, serves as a warning to me not to be exasperating.

Even more profoundly, if we realize we have made wrong decisions and are wandering in the desert, we do not have to endure forty years of hardship. We can turn around like the prodigal son and head for the Father who awaits us with open arms. Christ's mercy is always available.

*Is the tone of my life one of gratitude? Am I quick to repent?*

**Offerings — Numbers 15, Ephesians 5:2**



*Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Healing a bleeding woman*

Christ is the offering symbolized in all the beasts and foods in this chapter. Perhaps the previous chapter of failure needs the balancing reality that a way of forgiveness is available through sacrifice. People brought offerings, animal substitutes for the giver, just as Christ took our place. For us, the offering he made was complete and final, and our response should be gratitude. The act of selecting an animal, flour, olive oil, or wine, and taking them to the tabernacle became a repeated lesson in offering oneself to God. We see that our offerings please God.

The placement of this instruction is particularly interesting. The people had just failed so spectacularly that they were condemned to forty years of wandering. Those forty years are covered in seven chapters, three of which are instructional like this one. After this failure, there is still the reiteration of expectations for when they would settle in the land, and forgiveness for unintentional failures. In contrast, brazen disobedience was considered blasphemy that must be eradicated from the community.

Unfortunately, this is the category for the whole generation over 20 years of age, and the theme of death is repeated in these six chapters: for Sabbath-breaking, for rebellion, Miriam's death, a death-wish as the people once more complained about no water, and Aaron's death. Sometimes, even today, judgment is inevitable if there is blasphemy and unrepentance, and we can see our own version of wilderness wanderings.

At the end of the chapter men were told to wear tassels on their clothing to be reminded of God's commands and the need to obey them. The woman who reached out to Christ for healing by touching the tassel of his garment reminds us he was the Word represented by this imagery. Even when we have failed in some horrifying way, we are able to reach out for healing and forgiveness, grasping at a thread to pull us back into grace. God calls us to repentance.

*Do I avail myself of God's forgiveness for my own failures and those of others?*

### **Korah's Rebellion — Numbers 16, Matthew 10:28**



DEATH OF KORAH, DATHAN, AND ABIRAM  
And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking, ... the ground clave under  
that was under them: And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up,  
and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods.  
... (Numbers 16:31,32) (14: 33)

*Gustave Doré, Death of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram*

On our journey with Christ we need to guard against becoming rebellious and difficult people. While God's mercy is always available to us, even today those who rebel against the spiritual leaders God has given them can experience difficult consequences.

The fall of Korah and the other rebels into *Sheol* alerts us to Christ's teachings on hell. This story of judgment ends with the rebels being swallowed by the ground alive into the underworld and fire consuming another 250 people. All of these people were under a sentence of death because of their rebellion against going into the promised land, but death came quickly. The rebellion stirred up against Moses was just another evidence of their disbelief. We see how strongly God rejects rebellion.

*Sheol* in the Hebrew scripture denotes an underground place of the dead which is dreary and dark and where people live in captivity. There are thirteen references to hell in the Gospels, and Christ's parables include a warning of being sent to a place

of outer darkness. The New Testament tells us “he descended into hell” with the implication of offering liberation.

Moses stood between the living and the dead and stopped the plague, foreshadowing Christ’s work in confronting death for us and giving us life. When we are aware of rebellion in ourselves or others we can appeal for that mediating work. Though rebellion deserves death, mercy is available. God calls us to humility.

*Do I stay alert to the temptation of rebellion and humbly repent?*

### **The Rod — Numbers 17, Hebrews 9:4**



*Vincent Van Gogh, Almond Blossoms*

The rod, as wood, reminds us of the cross, and its blooming reminds us of Christ’s resurrection. When people challenged Aaron’s leadership, Moses took a wooden staff from each leader of the twelve tribes. Aaron’s staff miraculously bloomed and was preserved in the Ark. This life-giving affirmation of his leadership silenced the critics. They said the miracle reminded them of the sentence of death they were under, and showed them God’s support for leaders he has chosen to represent him.

The almond blossoms the rod produced are associated with life and light. The almond is one of the first trees to bloom after winter, and it was the model for a tree-like lamp in the temple. Hebrews says the rod was placed inside the Ark with the manna and stone tablets. Each of these were images of Christ: the rod for his miraculous resurrection from death, the manna for him as bread of life, and the tablets for Christ as the word.

Applying Aaron’s rod as an image of death and resurrection to ourselves is helpful as well. If there is something dry and dead in our lives, we are like Aaron’s rod. If we put it into God’s presence—they laid the rods before the Ark—God can miraculously bring life. Expressed metaphorically, our task is to always go into God’s presence and watch for almond blossoms. Just as Aaron’s almond branches strengthened him, beautiful blossoms we see give us messages of hope. Life can

always burst forth from dry and dead things thanks to God's power. When I pray, this imagery of flowers bringing beauty is a reminder of transformation. God calls us to hope.

*Do I pray in hope for life and transformation when my life feels barren?*

**No Inheritance — Numbers 18, Luke 8:1-3**

Anno libri M.S.  
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*Augustin Tünger, Apostle Peter paying the temple tax with a coin from the fish's mouth*

On our journey with Christ we need to put ministry first and not worry or be consumed with financial needs. Priests and Levites had no land, corresponding to Christ's lack of property. Instead, they were supported by gifts from the people of God. Christ had numerous women and others supporting his work. We are reminded that serving God is a real job, worthy of adequate pay. And yet even Christ depended on moments of surprising provision to familiar to missionaries today with a coin in a fish's mouth sufficient for paying the temple tax.

Today all of us are called as priests which is indicated as a "special privilege of service". When we serve it helps to remember it is a privilege. Priest and Levites were given salaries from the donations of the people, but they were expected to tithe what they received as well.

A call to ministry and willingness to be supported by the donations of other believers is a strong pattern in modern missions. During my childhood as the child of Wycliffe Bible Translators, I saw this lifestyle as completely normal, since all of my parents' colleagues lived with the same system. I also saw a pattern of generosity to those around them, with people taking the idea of not only tithing but giving as much as they could.

This way of living, so contrary to the values of our materialistic culture, is a beautiful way of following in the footsteps of these ancient Hebrews as well as of Jesus. If not called to do that, we are surely called to be generous to those who do have that calling. If God is calling one to live from donations for ministry, it is nothing to be afraid of! God calls us to be worry-free.

*Am I generous with the gifts God has given me?*

**The Red Heifer — Numbers 19, Hebrews 13:11-13**



*Marc Chagall, Red Cow in The Yellow Sky*

The red heifer ceremony is analogous to Christ's death. The animal is a biological anomaly, perhaps analogous to the unusual biology of Christ. Because the animal is without blemish, slaughtered outside the camp, blood sprinkled, and burned, we can see analogies to the crucifixion. Afterwards the priest bathed in flowing water, an analogy to baptism in the flowing Jordan River.

Cedar, hyssop, and a crimson worm were added to the fire, and the resulting ashes were mixed with water to make a holy water to purify things that became impure. The law is practical regarding protection from contamination and infection. This chapter explains how to make disinfectant since ashes mixed with water make lye, the basis of homemade soaps. The things added are all antibacterial and antifungal.

The rest of the chapter explains how being around death contaminates and needs to be purified with this disinfectant. As the generation under condemnation died away, death must have been a constant for them, perhaps an average of one hundred people a day. The spiritual symbolism adds meaning, since Christ cleanses us from all contamination that leads to death.

The Mishnah explains there were only nine red heifers sacrificed in Israel. An attempt to breed red heifers is motivated by Maimonides' prediction that finding one will correspond with the Messiah's coming. The Temple Institute, located in the same plaza as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, is making preparations for rebuilding the Temple, and as part of their efforts has twice thought they had a legitimate red heifer and then disqualified them.

Tradition is that the red heifer is suffering Israel, an image Chagall incorporated into many paintings. For us it is not only suffering Israel, but also the suffering Christ. The perfection and uniqueness of Christ is highlighted by this imagery of a rare breed. Just as the holy water purified people, we are purified from the contamination of death by his death. God calls us to purity.

*Do I take seriously the need for literal and metaphorical purification to live a healthy life? Do I recognize Christ as the means of my salvation?*

### **Rock—Numbers 20, I Corinthians 10:4**



*Nicolas Poussin, Moses Striking the Rock*

Christ is identified as the rock which provided water in this story. Moses' and Aaron's disobedience in striking the rock rather than speaking to it resulted in their dying before entering the promised land. We see how much God requires his leaders to trust him and show his holiness to others.

They were to command the rock to give water instead of striking it as in Exodus 17. Instead, they struck it and said "must WE bring you water." God responded by saying they did not trust him, they rebelled, and they would not lead the people into the land. The rebellion so characteristic of the people they had been leading finally infected them.

The forty years of wandering had almost come to an end and they were starting preparations to enter the promised land. To do so by the most practical route would have been through Edom, but when Edom refused, they had to take a detour, given that God had forbidden them to fight these close relatives.

Aaron died and was mourned by the people. Before Moses died, he acknowledged God as Rock in his final poem. This theme continues through scripture and culminates with Christ's exhortation for us to build our lives on the Rock. In my own life this has been an image of stability when life is unstable and uncertain. God calls us to trust him.

*Do I recognize Christ as source of stability and provision in every aspect of my life?*

### **The Bronze Serpent — Numbers 21, John 3:14-15**



*Anthony van Dyck, Moses and the brazen serpent*

Christ interpreted this story as an image of himself on the cross, the means of saving from certain death. The Israelites complained of being tired of manna just as they had at the beginning of their journey. Result: punishment and death by poisonous snakes. Moses was told to make an image of what caused their death and for those bitten to look at it and be saved.

This represented the final dying out of the rebellious generation that had wandered the desert for forty years. The new generation had new attitudes. Most had never seen Egypt so could not have been part of the crowd complaining about having been brought out of Egypt to die.

This new generation had the toughness that came from being raised in a difficult environment, and perhaps they had a great deal more enthusiasm for the idea of fighting to have a settled, more comfortable life without any misplaced nostalgia for the Egyptian past. Even before the bronze snake incident, when some were attacked and captured, they boldly went and got their people back.

We are told later that it was just before their encounter with the Amorites that the entire previous generation had died. When Amorite King Sihon refused them safe passage, they were energized to fight and win against him. His main city, Heshbon, was parallel with the north of the Dead Sea. When King Og of Bashan attacked them, they fought back and defeated his people. His territory was more parallel to the Sea of Galilee. These early battles perhaps gave them confidence for the wars to come, but they also provided extensive territory on the east of the Jordan.

The chapter goes from death and complaining to victory in battle. This is the same direction we want our lives to go. We want to become sturdy, hardy people of faith who have confidence that with God's backing, we can win the spiritual battles ahead of us. God calls us to be brave.

*Am I committed to being positive even in difficult circumstances and not make complaints a part of my life?*

**Balaam — Numbers 22-23, Matthew 6:24**



*Gustav Jaeger, Balaam and the Angel*

On our journey with Christ we can be protected from enemies who wish to harm us, whatever their motives. Whether unbelievers like the King of Moab, or a believer like Balaam who should have known better, God can turn curses into blessings.

Balaam's greed contrasts with Christ who lived contentedly as a poor man. Balaam is the archetype of the religious man corrupted by seeing the money he can get from ministry. Balaam responded to the King of Moab's promise to pay him well, despite God warning him against it. God told him he must bless, not curse. Given God's frustration and desire to wipe out Israel a few chapters earlier at the start of the forty years of wandering, this represents a new era and new time for Israel. Balaam had to say in mercy that God saw nothing wrong with Israel.

The talking donkey had more spiritual perception than his human owner, making for comedy. In the New Testament we're told that Balaam loved to earn money for doing wrong, but was stopped when the donkey rebuked him with a human voice. Today our emotions and drives for health, self-esteem, status, identity, adventure, and avoidance of our fears, are manipulated to sell goods, turning us to consumer products to meet those needs. We know it is a trick, but we fall for it anyway, even among religious leaders. Balaam's sin is alive and well.

Moab was south of the land of Ammon they had conquered, bordering the Dead Sea. Balak, King of Moab, was alarmed and threatened, and called Balaam to fight back with a spiritual curse. Twice, despite all their offerings and efforts, Balaam blessed Israel, and this beautiful blessing comes from this compromised prophet. God does not lie, change his mind, fail to act, or fail to fulfill a promise. God's blessing cannot be reversed.

We can claim this promise of blessing for ourselves and those we know. We can also claim what is repeatedly said of this incident, that God turned a curse into a blessing. When there are those who truly wish to do us harm, this is remarkably comforting. God calls us to trust his blessing, no matter what others think.

*Do I expect God's blessing even when facing opposition?*

### **A Star will Rise—Numbers 24, Matthew 2:1-2**



*Henry Ossawa Tanner, The Three Wise Men*

Just as Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet, was able to foresee the coming of the Messiah, so the Wise Men in Christ's time came from afar, having somehow discerned there was a new Jewish king. This third effort to curse Israel resulted in

even greater prophetic blessing and the rage of King Balak who had hired Balaam to curse his enemies.

Despite his sin, Balaam saw the coming Kingdom and predicted: a people set apart, who would be numerous, blessed, protected, receiving wonders from God, beautiful, like fruitful trees, well provided for, exalted, and with a victorious ruler. The Messianic prophecy, of a star from Jacob, and a scepter from Israel applies to David and Christ. In scripture, God continually allowed his people to foresee the future, something granted at times to us today.

Balaam's prophecies serve as the book's climax. The enemy king wanted to curse Israel, but God repeatedly blessed through the prophet. The promise to Abraham was reiterated here that those who bless Israel would be blessed and those who curse Israel would be cursed. Despite all their failures, God's presence and promises were still with them.

The theme of this mysterious future ruler who will come from Israel and rule all the nations is refined and developed over the centuries, so that by the time Christ came, the number of Messianic prophecies he fulfilled is overwhelming. Balaam foresaw the incarnation: "I see him, but not in the present time. I perceive him, but far in the distant future." God calls us to always be looking for Christ.

*Do I live in Christ, knowing that safely in him my life is blessed?*

**Phinehas — Numbers 25, John 2:17**



*Andrey Mirinov, Expulsion of the merchants from the temple*

On our journey with Christ, we need to ruthlessly root out the compromises of worldly and idolatrous living that may tempt us. Israel failed terribly with idolatry and immorality, and a zealous leader to bring them back to holiness.

Phinehas' passionate zeal for holiness corresponds to Christ's zeal for God's holiness, but the power was used in very different ways. Phinehas used a spear to kill, whereas Christ turned over tables and used a whip to drive out livestock. Phinehas is a unique figure, a policeman/priest. In Psalms we are told Phinehas had the courage to intervene and so has been regarded as a righteous man. In Deuteronomy the point is made that everyone who worshipped the idol died, and those who resisted temptation lived.

Even though the new generation was proving to be hardy warriors, they quickly fell for sexual temptations which led them to idolatry. Not only Moab, but people from Midian who were from yet further south in the Arabian peninsula, tempted them and engaged them in worship of their gods. Balaam is credited with this strategy, despite having been forced to bless Israel.

The story tells us what we deserve for immorality--dramatic and sudden death. This is justice without mercy. But in Christ he has taken death on himself and we

are left only with mercy if we ask for it, the complete removal of all of our sins and new life. Accepting the legitimacy of death for idolatry explains most God-sanctioned violence in scripture. My sensibilities have been so trained by grace and mercy in Christ, that rejection of anyone is superseded by the desire to win others over to God's love. I can see that idolatry is a desecration of God's image, and since Christ is the true image of God, anti-idolatry history prepares the way for him. Idolatry leads to death, and in this instance the immediacy of death serves as a warning. Immorality desecrates God's image in us.

However, my anxiety about the story is not out of place. Among white supremacists a book counseled following in Phinehas' footsteps to avenge harm to Whites. The result: several home-grown terrorists had this book in their possession before committing their crimes. Given such a serious misuse of the story, we need to evaluate it in light of Christ's example and teaching. His teaching requires deep purity, but also deep compassion. God calls us to be pure in heart.

*Do I see the seriousness of idolatry and immorality and realize they lead to death?*

#### **Preparing for Inheritance — Numbers 26-27, Ephesians 1:11-12**



*Tintoretto, The Jews in the desert*

Inheriting land prefigures our inheritance, the Kingdom of Heaven. But it can also serve as a figure for practical places in our own lives where we are called to live and work and serve.

The second census described who would receive the land, and is a bookend to the census before their journey began. The new generation of fighting age men, a total of 601,730 compares to the earlier total of 603,550. A new generation had to take up the faith, a continual process that applies today.

Women would inherit when there was no male heir in the family. This is repeated four different times, highlighting the importance of keeping the family line connected to land. Joshua, who had served as Moses' primary assistant and the leader of the armed forces, was commissioned as the one to distribute Israel's inheritance. We are reassured by this story of how much God values the rights of women.

As the passage in Ephesians tells us, we have received a great inheritance through Christ, and in other passages, the Holy Spirit, his gifts, the promise of salvation, God's word, and eternal life in heaven are in our inheritance. We live with much greater dignity if we remember all these spiritual riches. Paul tells us we are already citizens of heaven, seated there with Christ. We already possess the Kingdom of Heaven. God calls us to take possession of that inheritance in practical ways today.

*Do I claim and use the spiritual blessings that are my inheritance as a Christian?*

**More sacrifices — Numbers 28-29, John 6:54-56**



*Rembrandt van Rijn, The Crucifixion*

Christ's death gives life to us, just as the sacrificial system of worship acknowledged that God is the source of life. These chapters build on previous instructions regarding worship through sacrifices, and the number of normal annual offerings for the community was prescribed. Totals in a year would be a minimum of 1,044 lambs, 95 bulls, 31 rams and 24 goats, or 1,194 creatures in all. This served as food for the priests and their families. We are reminded that our offerings please God and that worship routines help sustain our faith.

The central feast as far as the number of sacrifices was Tabernacles. The week started with sacrifice of thirteen bulls, and went down one per day until seven were sacrificed on the seventh day, followed by one on the eighth. This feast represents our lives in God's presence in happiness and celebration.

The differing moods of the festivals come through here: from the drama of a week of sacrifices as people live outdoors for Sukkot, to an intimate family meal at Passover, to community gatherings on Pentecost and Rosh Hashanah, to fasting for the Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur. Going without food for a day as a sign of humility before God, is still done annually by the Jewish community. While offering animals, even feasting on them, was part of demonstrating commitment, fasting was a way of

being humble. Perhaps it is fair to say that doing without food temporarily is a way of offering oneself as a sacrifice.

While Jews and some Christians celebrate these events today, they do so without any sacrifices. For Jews, sacrifice ended when the temple was destroyed. For Christians, it ended when Christ died and rose again. But the symbolic sacrifices of prayer, worship, and even fasting are still available to us. They all, particularly fasting, can help align our desires and longings with God's will and give us the confidence that God's will is good. God calls us to be a living sacrifice.

*Do I live with gratitude for Christ's sacrifice, and a willing heart to offer my life as a sacrifice?*

### Vows — Numbers 30, Matthew 5:33-37



*Rembrandt van Rijn, Jesus among his students*

Christ quoted from this chapter when teaching that it is better to mean what you say rather than make promises those with authority over you can change. We see how much God values truthfulness and integrity. In the context, Christ said he was not nullifying the law, but he raised the bar: not just no murder, but manage anger well; not just no adultery, but no inner lust; a higher commitment to marriage; not

seeking justice when offended, but responding with mercy; not just loving neighbors, but loving enemies as well.

We can thus interpret this to mean that we should not just do what we formally promise, but that our intentions, words and actions all align. This heart level obedience and sincerity is a struggle, and it is only through the promptings of the Spirit that we even notice we are falling into the worst aspects of our human nature. Who of us have not fallen into hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, or envy which we know are not aligned with God's Spirit? Nor is the insincerity of not doing what we say acceptable. God calls us to integrity.

The law was always intended to involve the inner recesses of each heart, not merely external fulfillment of rules. Christ came and reinforced that and set the standard of perfect fulfillment. Only he reached that perfection, but he simultaneously offered us his nature in the form of the Spirit, bringing us into conformity with his standards.

*Is my word known to be reliable? Am I allowing Christ to conform me to his character?*

## **Vengeance on Midian — Numbers 31, I Corinthians 12:2**



*Gerard Hoet et. al., Five Kings of Midian slain by Israel*

On our journey with Christ we will face times when our community is in danger of losing its identity and loyalty to God. A strong and stern response may be necessary for the integrity of the community and its journey. Christ faced this with

the corruption in the religious hierarchy, particularly the Pharisees. Even more intimately, he faced it with what Judas chose to do. In Israel's case the challenge was idolatry and worldliness, and in ours it is usually the same—something other than God is in danger of becoming the priority.

Phinehas led 12,000 warriors into battle against idolatry. Christ, the true image of God, came to rescue all mankind from making up their own gods. We see how strongly God rejects idolatry and are challenged to examine our own tendencies today to put other things in his place. Once Christ came and revealed God in human form, his call has been to call idolaters to himself, not condemn them to death.

So sadly, the history of the church justified the violent approach and continued in the way of Phinehas instead of Christ. Taking vengeance on Midian for idolatry is presented as God's command, but on a purely human level, it looks like blaming and scapegoating those with whom you were complicit in wrongdoing. Painfully, after killing all the men, Moses insists they kill women and boys. Intellectually I accept this as a consequence of leading others into idolatry, but emotionally I find it difficult. Making matters worse is that Midianites were children of Abraham by his concubine Keturah, so they were relatives. Moses' wife was a Midianite.

After Christ, the approach to idolaters was transformed. We see this in Paul who was a spiritual warrior who said he fought with wild beasts in Ephesus. That great and wealthy city was a center of Diana/Artemis worship, and her temple one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. When Paul preached, he was nearly killed by the Diana-devotees fearful of losing business. Nevertheless, his preaching won. About 200 years later the temple was destroyed by non-Christian invaders, and was not rebuilt. Today it is a ruin, while over time Ephesus became an important Christian city, and Paul's letter to the new believers is read and treasured by millions every day. Paul won through preaching and patient suffering, not violence, and he is our model. God calls us to put Christ above all.

*Am I wholehearted in my commitment to Christ and in my desire to draw others to that same commitment?*

**A Written Record — Numbers 32-33, Luke 1:3-4**



*Edouard Moyer, Presentation of the Torah*

The written record of Israel's journey reminds us that we are provided with written records of Christ's journeys and even those of Paul. Moses was instructed to keep a written record, and in this chapter we have geographic details which fill in information from the previous stories. We are reminded how important it is to remember and review our own journey with God.

The importance of written law is reinforced in instructions to the king who is to make an authorized copy and read it daily which will keep him from pride and thinking he is above his fellow citizens. Moses was told to write down the words of his song, and from that instruction the application was made that each man should have his own Torah scroll to read. It is said that women also learned to read and write.

The emphasis on literacy in Jewish culture created love and skill in learning which enabled Jews to surge to the forefront as intellectuals in the modern era. Their contributions are astonishingly out of proportion to their numbers, affirming the promise that other nations will see they belong to God and be in awe.

Synagogues have divided the Torah (the first five books) into a year-long set of Sabbath readings. In addition, a selection from the rest of the Hebrew scriptures is read, and on holidays additional readings are done. Since the invention of the printing press and the exhortations of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers, Christians have been urged to read scripture for themselves.

A written record of our own spiritual journey can encourage us with seeing how we have grown, how prayers have been answered, how God has been faithful to us. God calls us to remember.

*Is journaling a helpful part of my spiritual journey?*

#### **A Well-Ordered Place — Numbers 34-36, I Timothy 2:1-2**



*Vincent Van Gogh, Field with plowing farmer*

Any peaceful, well-ordered kingdom in the world is in some measure a precursor of Christ's well-ordered Kingdom. The book began with organizing the moving people, and this section anticipates creating a settled life. There is an outline of the territory, leaders selected to distribute land, towns and surrounding pastures for the Levites, cities of refuge, and affirmation of inheritance rights for women.

Once again we see organizational patterns that became characteristic of nations and churches. Bishops governed in community over specific physical spaces. Within their domains were homes and provisions for monastic communities. Churches were envisioned as places of sanctuary. Roles for women were established within a patriarchal model.

Having reached a launching point for entering the land after their 40 year journey, the pause of preparation involved reflection which is what the next book, Deuteronomy gives us. We too, reach moments of attaining long-desired goals when a pause to reflect gives us energy for what is coming next.

Israel experienced years of orderly and pleasant life by following the guidelines here. We are told to pray for kings and authorities that we might live in peace, in a foretaste of what is to come at the end of time. So often the news of the politics of our day is the opposite of the happy community. Consequently, we need to pray for these things, but we also need to spend time appreciating what is good in our communities and not get trapped in the tragedy of the day. God calls us to live in peace.

*Do I pray for the peace of my country?*