

Exposition of the Book of Numbers

Sunset Bible Church Adult Sunday School 2021

Week 3: Four Rebellions (Numbers 11-15)

And all the Israelites murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had perished in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us into this land only to be killed by the sword, that our wives and our children should become plunder? Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let's appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

Numbers 11:2-4

Outline of the Class/Book

- Week 3: Four Rebellions (11-15)
- Week 4: Korah's Rebellion (16-19)
- Week 5: Balaam and the Moabite (20-25)
- Week 6: A New Generation (26-27)
- Week 7: Offerings and Holy Days (28-30)
- Week 8: Preparation to Enter the Promised Land (31-33)
- Week 9: Cities and Boundaries (34-36); Conclusion

Opening Discussion:

- What did you notice as you read that you had not noticed before? What stood out to you?
- What can we learn about God in these chapters? How is He portrayed?
- What questions do you still have about the text? What didn't make sense?

Rebellion Cycle 1: From Sinai to Zin (10:11-15:41)

The end of chapter 10 is the high point of the Book of Numbers spiritually. The beginning of chapter 11 records the beginning of the spiritual decline of Israel that resulted in God's judging the nation.

The First Rebellion: General Murmuring and a Warning from the Lord (11:1-3)

Not long after Israel left Sinai, the people began to grumble again. To warn them that their dissatisfaction could develop into more serious rebellion, God sent fire on the outskirts of the camp. It is not clear that the fire (lightning?) that God sent killed some of the people or only burned up things such as bushes and tents. Evidently the people recognized this event as a warning from God and cried out to Moses whose intercession moved God to withhold further discipline. The people named the site Taberah (burning) in memory of this event.

The Second Rebellion: Complaint about Food (11:4-35)

- **The Rabble's Complaint (11:4-9)** The "rabble" (v. 4) were the non-Israelites who had come out of Egypt with God's people (Exod. 12:38). It did not take them long to become discontented with conditions in the desert and to complain about their bland diet of manna. Their grumbling quickly infected the Israelites (v. 4). These malcontents despised

God's provision of manna and longed for the stronger flavors they had enjoyed in Egypt. They failed to take heed to the warning God had given at Taberah. To spurn a regularly occurring, abundant and nutritious food only because it is boring is a pitiable mark of our tendency toward ingratitude.

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- **Moses' Complaint about the People (11:10-15)** Moses must have felt caught in the middle (vv. 10-15). On the one hand the people seemed to be mutinous, and on the other God was angry because of their attitude (v. 10). The discomfort of desert travel seems to have affected him too. He failed to look to God for His wisdom and provision. Instead he became frustrated. This frustration seems traceable to Moses' taking on more responsibility for the people than was really his.

Moses' use of the mother figure to describe God (v. 12) is unusual but not unique in Scripture (e.g., Exod. 4:22; Isa. 49:15; 66:13; Hos. 11:1; cf. 1 Thess. 2:7). Normally the Bible presents God as a male because He relates to people in traditionally male roles primarily. However, He also deals with us in ways that are more typically female, and in these instances He compares Himself to females.

- **YHWH Responds to Moses, Sending His Spirit on the 70 Elders (11:16-30)** God again accommodated to Moses' weakness (vv. 16-23; cf. Exod. 4:14) and provided 70 men to share his responsibility of explaining God's will to the people. He did this so their complaining would not grow into mob violence. God's Spirit rested on Moses in a special measure (v. 17). God now gave these elders His Spirit in similar fashion and with Him the ability to prophesy. Here, that does not refer to prediction or even to proclamation but to giving (in song or speech) praise and similar expressions without prior training (see the comparable experience of Saul in 1 Sam. 10:9-11).

God's promise to provide meat stretched Moses' faith to its limit (vv. 21-22). God reminded him that His power was limitless. Even Moses had temporarily forgotten the miracles in Egypt.

Evidently the elders' prophesying was a singular occurrence; it happened only on this one occasion (v. 25). This incident indicates that God's bestowal of the Holy Spirit at this time was temporary. The Spirit had not previously been on these elders. Furthermore it was selective. The Spirit was not on all the Israelites as He was on these elders.

We have no reason to believe that God withdrew the Spirit from the elders. Evidently only their ability to prophesy ceased (v. 25). This ability was a divine sign to the people that dampened their rebellious spirits. It was not Moses who was indispensable for Israel, but the Lord's Spirit.

Joshua's jealousy for Moses' honor in the nation (v. 28) is understandable, but he had greater concern for Moses' honor than for the good of the people. Moses realized that Israel would be better off if God had given all the people His Spirit and the gift of prophecy. God may have included this incident involving Joshua in the narrative because of his later role as Israel's leader. He also may

have done so to emphasize the value of the gift of the Holy Spirit that God graciously gave the people even in their rebellious condition.

- **YHWH Provides Quail (11:31-32)** The Spirit (Heb. *ruah*) of Yahweh settled the leadership problem (v. 29), and now the wind (Heb. *ruah*) from Yahweh would solve the food problem (v. 31). The wind was from the southeast (Ps. 78:26) and apparently blew these quails from the Gulf of Aqabah (vv. 31-34). Normally quails migrated to the northeast, from central Africa, so the direction from which these quails came was an abnormal provision of the Lord. The NASB interpreted verse 31 as meaning the quails lay three feet deep on the ground, but the NIV translators understood that they flew about three feet above the ground.
- **YHWH Sends a Plague (11:33-35)** The sickness of the people was a judgment for their greed. They wanted something for themselves that God had not chosen for them.

2

The Third Rebellion: Challenge to Moses' Authority (12:1-16)

- **Miriam and Aaron Speak against Moses (12:1-3)** Miriam was the outspoken leader in this incident. The priority of her name over Aaron's and the feminine gender of the verb in the Hebrew text translated "spoke" indicate this (v. 1).

The Cushite woman Moses had married was probably not Zipporah (Exod. 2:21). (a) Zipporah was from Midian in Arabia. At this time Cush was a name for Upper Egypt (Ethiopia). (b) It seems unlikely that Miriam would have objected at this time to Moses' marrying Zipporah since he had married her years before this incident. The repetition of the phrase "for he had married a Cushite woman" (v. 1) seems to imply a recent marriage. This would explain Miriam's objection at this time better. (c) We may assume, therefore, that Zipporah had died and that Moses had remarried. There is no reason to believe that Moses was married to two women at the same time, though this is possible. (d) Marriage to a Cushite was within the will of God. God had only forbidden the Israelites from marrying Canaanites (Exod. 34:16).

Evidently Miriam and Aaron felt their leading roles in Israel as prophetess (Exod. 15:20) and high priest were losing distinctiveness as God gave 70 elders the privilege of mediating His word. Perhaps Miriam saw in Moses' new wife a threat to her role as the leading female in Israel. Moses' marriage to the Cushite woman may have been nothing more than an excuse.

The statement of Moses' humility (v. 3) was not a boastful claim by the writer but an inspired statement of fact. We need not conclude that another writer added it later since it is essential to the argument of this passage. That another writer added it later is a distinct possibility, however.

- **YHWH's Response (12:4-9)** God's common method of communicating with His prophets was by giving them visions and dreams (v. 6). Moses was a specially privileged

prophet, however, with whom God spoke directly without any special mediation. He spoke with Moses as friends converse (v. 8; cf. Exod. 33:11).

- **YHWH's Judgment of Miriam (12:10-12)** The Lord punished Miriam for her dissatisfaction with her divinely appointed role in the nation. He punished her with leprosy, the disease that specially symbolized sin (Lev. 13–14). All the Israelites probably identified her self-assertion as sin. Perhaps God did not smite Aaron because his involvement was not as great. Moses interceded for Miriam at Aaron's pleading. Ironically, Aaron had wanted to be like Moses, but instead of being able to intercede directly with God as Moses did, Aaron had to appeal to Moses who interceded with God.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to vindicate Moses' divinely given leadership and to brush aside any further suggestion that, because of the establishment of other forms of authority, the type of leadership epitomized in Moses was no longer valid.

- **The Healing of Miriam (12:13-15)** God again showed mercy. He removed Miriam's leprosy but punished her with exclusion from the camp for seven days (Lev. 14:8). Spitting in the face (v. 14) was an act of contempt for one who had done something despicable (cf. Deut. 25:9; Job 17:6; 30:10). The people suffered too as a result of Miriam and Aaron's rebellion: God halted their progress toward the Promised Land again (v. 15; cf. 11:20).

These three failures to be content with God's provisions and plans at Taberah, Kibroth-hattaavah, and Hazereth prepared the Israelites for an even more serious failure at Kadesh.

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The Fourth Rebellion: Rejection of the Promised Land (13:1-14:45)

- **Spies Sent into the Land (13:1-25)** When the people arrived at Kadesh the Lord told them to go up and take possession of the land He had promised them (Deut. 1:19-21). Kadesh stood in the Desert of Zin, which was a section of the great Paran wilderness. The people asked Moses if they could send spies ahead of them, “that they may search out the land for us, and bring back to us word of the way by which we should go up, and the cities which we shall enter” (Deut. 1:22).

Moses allowed this (Deut. 1:23), with God's permission (Num. 13:2). Clearly the Israelites were not rebelling against God by sending the spies, but neither were they stepping forward in bold obedience with strong confidence in God, as they should have done. Why did God not lead Moses to record here (vv. 1-3) the fact that the sending of the spies was the people's idea (Deut. 1:22)? The reason may be that this was not the sin that resulted in God's postponement of their entrance into Canaan. Their reaction to the spies' report caused that result. The mission of the spies had some genuine value to the Israelites (vv. 18-20), but it also opened the possibility of fear and failure to obey God.

The men named as the spies were not the same as the tribal princes (1:5-15; 7:12; et al.). Their personal qualifications for this mission may have been the basis for their selection.

The name “Joshua” (v. 16) describes a special role that Moses wished Joshua to have when he renamed him. Joshua's earlier name, Hoshea, simply means “he has saved.” The person or god who saves is not clear. Moses specified YHWH as the source of salvation by renaming Joshua.

The Negev (lit. “south”) was the arid area to the south of Canaan that formed a transition from the desert to the south to the cultivated fields of Canaan to the north. Rainfall averages 8-12 inches per year in the Negev, making it semi-arid. The hill country (v. 17) refers to the more mountainous areas of Canaan. “The time of first-ripe grapes” (v. 20) would have been late July or early August.

Hebron was a large fortified town. Moses gave it special emphasis here because it was there that God had promised to give Abraham the land (Gen. 13:14-18). From there Abraham had set out to defeat a coalition of kings (Gen. 14:13). The only piece of real estate Abraham possessed in Canaan was in Hebron, and there he and the other patriarchs lay buried. The spies, of course, knew these historical facts, and memories of these patriarchal events should have strengthened their faith in Yahweh as they passed through Hebron.

Zoan (v. 22) is another name for Tanis, the capital city of Egypt from which the Israelites had come. The valley of Eshcol (v. 23) was apparently just north of Hebron on the way to Jerusalem. The Hebrew word translated “Eshcol” refers to the stalk or stem of some fruit or flower. From this it came to mean a whole bunch or “cluster” (of grapes). A huge cluster of grapes carried on a pole between two men has long been a symbol of the land of Israel. This figure illustrates the great agricultural productivity of the land. It still is a popular symbol of modern Israel today.

- **The Reports of the Spies (13:26-33)** The spies reported that the land was indeed as fruitful as they had heard (v. 27), “nevertheless ...” (v. 28). Everything the spies said from this word on was uncalled for. Their commission had been to view the land and to report back on what they saw. It was not their job to determine if the Israelites could overcome the Canaanites. God had promised that He would give the land to His people. It was the people and cities in Canaan that discouraged the spies (v. 28). As they had despised God's provisions and plans (chs. 11–12), the 10 spies now disbelieved God's promises that He would give the land and its people into their hands. They reckoned only on their own natural ability and failed to rely on God's supernatural ability (v. 31).

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They described the tall Anakites as Nephilim (v. 33). The word “Nephilim” means strong ones or tyrants, not people of gigantic stature, though it came to imply superhuman giants. The spies concluded that the Anakites were relatives of the Nephilim. The use of the term *Nephilim* seems to be deliberately provocative of fear, a term not unlike the concept of bogeymen and hobgoblins.

- **The People's Response to the Spies' Reports: Rebellion (14:1-4)** God had just proved His supernatural power to the Israelites three times since the nation had left Sinai (chs.

11–12). There was no excuse for this failure to trust Him to lead them victoriously into Canaan.

- **Entreaty made to the People (14:5-9)** Moses and Aaron tried to persuade the people to enter the land (Deut. 1:29-31). They also prayed for the nation in this hour of its rebellion (v. 5). More-over Joshua and Caleb warned the people against turning back (vv. 7-9). They rightly identified the true actions of the Israelite majority as rebellion against God and fear of the Canaanites (v. 9). They reminded the people that God was with them (v. 9).
- **YHWH's response (14:10-12)** The congregation violently rejected their pleas to trust and obey God (v. 10). He Himself prevented the people from stoning Caleb and Joshua by manifesting Himself (v. 10).

The failure of the Israelites grew out of unbelief (v. 11; cf. Heb. 3:19). They failed to believe that God would give them the land of their enemies as He had promised.

Often in Scripture we read of people asking God, “How long?” However, here it is God who asked this of Moses. This illustrates the intimate relationship that Moses and God enjoyed (12:7-8). Was God's threatened action (14:12) a real possibility, or was He only testing Moses' reaction with this offer? God had threatened a similar punishment at Sinai when the Israelites had made the golden calf (Exod. 32:10). God could have fulfilled His promises to Abraham by destroying and dispos-sessing all the other living Israelites and by sparing only Moses and his descendants. However, God could not have fulfilled the prophetic promises that He had given through Jacob (Gen. 49), if He had done so. There would have to be descendants of Judah from whom a great ruler would come (Gen. 49:10) as well as some future for the other tribes. Perhaps God meant that He would completely destroy that older generation of Israelites immediately (cf. Exod. 32:10). He said that He would also give Moses and his descendants a much larger place in the nation. Perhaps then other peoples would regard Moses as the father of the Israelite nation.

This passage shows that the people failed to inherit the Promised Land and hence died in the wilderness without the blessing, not so much for a specific act of disobedience or for fear of the battles that lay ahead, but rather for the simple fact of their unbelief: They failed to trust in God.

- **Moses' Entreaty to YHWH (14:13-19)** As a faithful mediator, Moses again interceded for the disobedient Israelites, much as he had done at Sinai (cf. Exod. 32:11-13). He based his appeal on God's reputation among the Egyptians (vv. 13-14) and the other nations (vv. 15-16). He also cited God's promise that He would be patient (vv. 17-18) and His past loyal love to Israel (v. 19). Moses' words proved effective (v. 20).
- **Forgiveness and Judgment (14:20-38)** That God granted the people pardon in response to Moses' intercession is another indication of His grace (vv. 20-21). The failure of the Israelites would not frustrate God's purpose to manifest His glory throughout the earth through the seed of Abraham (v. 21). The present generation would die in the wilderness, but Caleb and Joshua would enter the Promised Land (vv. 24, 30).

The ten times the Israelites tested God (v. 22) by complaining were probably these:

1. At the Red Sea (Exod. 14:11-12)
2. At Marah (Exod. 15:23)
3. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:2)
4. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:20)
5. In the wilderness of Sin (Exod. 16:27)
6. At Rephidim (Exod. 17:1)
7. At Horeb (Exod. 32)
8. At Taberah (Num. 11:1)
9. At Kibroth-hattaavah (Num. 11:4)
10. At Kadesh (Num. 14:1-3)

It is noteworthy that in Egypt God sent 10 plagues to build the faith of His people, but in the wilderness they complained against Him in unbelief 10 times! Evidently the measure of their iniquity had reached its capacity, from God's viewpoint, with this tenth rebellion (cf. Gen. 15:16). Because the adult generation had failed to trust God, He would not defeat their enemies. Therefore He instructed them to march southeast toward the Gulf of Aqabah and away from the Amalekites and Canaanites (v. 25). Since they wanted to return to Egypt, God sent them back toward where they had been. Since they feared their children would die in Canaan, God would preserve those very children in the wilderness and give them a home in Canaan (v. 31). Since the adults had rejected Canaan, God would give it to their children (v. 31). Since they feared dying in Canaan, God would let them die in the wilderness (v. 2). When the Lord asked "How long?" (v. 27), He meant this was the end. The things he said next were irrevocably going to happen.

The Bible nowhere specifies a particular age of accountability for children. However the fact that God judged all the Israelites who were 20 years old and older for this sin seems significant. He evidently regarded those who had lived 20 years as responsible adults (v. 29).

The 40-year duration of the punishment resulted from the 40-day duration of the expedition by the spies (v. 34). These years included those already spent in the wilderness since complaining characterized the people from the time they first departed from Egypt.

The 10 spies who brought the majority opinion seem to have died shortly after God pronounced their sentence as a result of a plague He sent (v. 37).

- **The "Repentance" of the People (14:39-45)** Having received their sentence from the Lord, the people presumptuously proceeded to go up on their own to take the land (vv. 40-42). They refused to accept God's discipline as they had refused to accept His promise. Thus they rebelled against Him again, even though Moses sounded the ominous warning, "the LORD will not be with you" (v. 43). They tried to gain His blessings without Him, which is unbelief. Consequently God allowed their enemies to rout them. The key to success would not be their military might or psychological power but their obedient trust in God.

This rather large section of narrative (chs. 13—14) introduces an important element in the development of God's covenant with Israel: the theme of the faithfulness of God in keeping the covenant and the unfaithfulness of humans in not trusting Him. It is also possible for us Christians to fail to enter into our full reward if we fail to continue to

trust and obey God (1 Cor. 9:24–10:13; Heb. 3:12–4:14). Every genuine Christian will eventually go to heaven, but only the faithful will receive all the rewards God wants each Christian to possess. God will give or withhold these at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).

6

Further Laws and Offerings (15:1-41)

- **Offerings from the Land (15:1-16)** The Israelites were to accompany every burnt offering and every peace offering with a meal offering and a drink offering of wine. The amounts of meal and wine varied, and these variations are clear in the text. An ephah was about half a bushel, and a hin was about a gallon. Since grapes were large and abundant in Canaan (cf. 13:23) wine played a significant part in Israel's offerings. This offering expressed gratitude for the grapes of the land. The priests poured drink offerings out; they did not drink them.
- **Offerings of the Firstfruits (15:17-21)** The second law required the presentation of a cake made from the first-fruits of the land to God. The offerer was to lift it up before God and then give it to the priest. This offering expressed gratitude for the grain of the land.
- **Offerings for Unintentional Sins (15:22-31)** The third law dealt with the sin offering. Here sins of omission are in view whereas the law in Leviticus 4:13-21 dealt more with sins of commission. In both cases the sin offering covered sins committed unintentionally. This law also covered some deliberate sins if the sinner offered public confession, full restitution, and a sin offering (Lev. 6:1-7). These offerings did not cover sins committed in defiance of God. In these cases the sinner was to die (vv. 30-31). Moses recorded a case involving such a sin in the next section.
- **Case Law: Execution of a Sabbath-Breaker (15:32-36)** Sabbath observance was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant. To violate the Sabbath law deliberately amounted to repudiating God's sovereignty. This incident illustrates the fate of the Israelite or foreigner in Israel who deliberately violated the law of Sabbath observance. It clarifies the meaning of defiant sin as well as what it means to be “cut off from among his people” (vv. 30-31). Violation of this law drew the death penalty (Exod. 31:14-15; 35:2). God revealed here that such an offender was to die by stoning (cf. Lev. 20:2). Moses had previously recorded the penalty, but not the method of execution (v. 34).

There are eleven offenses punishable by stoning according to the Old Testament: idolatry (Deut. 17:2-7); encouragement of idolatry (Deut. 13:6-10); child sacrifice (Lev. 20:2-5); prophecy in the name of another god (Deut. 13:1-5); divination (Lev. 20:27); blasphemy (Lev. 24:15-16); breaking the Sabbath (Num. 15:32-36); murder by an ox (Exod. 21:28-29); adultery (Deut. 22:22ff.); rebellion by a son (Deut. 21:18ff.); violation of God's ban on plunder devoted to him (Josh. 7:25).

- **Tassels on Garments: Visual Reminders to Keep the Law (15:37-41)** The Israelites were to wear tassels on the four corners of their upper outer garments (Deut. 22:12). Old

pictures of tassels on garments that ancient Near Easterners wore show that they were about six inches long.

The Israelite was to fasten the tassel to the garment with a blue thread, or it had to contain a blue thread. The blue color symbolized heavenly origin and royalty. Thus God apparently wanted the blue thread to remind the Israelites of their holy calling as a kingdom of priests. These tassels reminded the Israelites of their privileged position in the world and their noble and holy calling.

The tassels were clearly a visual aid for the Israelites and probably produced a conditioned response in the minds of pious Jews (cf. Deut. 6:6-9). They did not bring to mind any one commandment but reminded the observer that he should observe all of God's laws. He was distinct by virtue of his calling as was the garment he observed. Perhaps God also chose the outer garment because the Israelites were as His outer garment by which the world recognized Him. His people were to be an adornment to Him (cf. Titus 2:10). Thus God specified something that would warn His people *before* they sinned; He did not just specify punishment *after* they sinned.

This legislation is the basis for the custom of wearing a tallis or prayer shawl that modern observant Jews still wear. It is also the basis for the flag of the modern state of Israel's blue color.

Reading Numbers Together: You can certainly benefit from this class by attending and taking part in the discussions, but I believe you will benefit that much more by committing to reading through Numbers along with the class. To the end, I will be sending out reading guides every week that will include questions that will be discussed the following week (which is how we will begin each class). You can choose to read each section in a single sitting, spread it out through the week, or just attend the class and continue with your current Bible reading plan. If you do choose to read with us, here is the reading for each week:

- Week of 8/1: Numbers 16-20
- Week of 8/8: Numbers 21-25
- Week of 8/15: Numbers 26-27
- Week of 8/22: Numbers 28-30
- Week of 8/29: Numbers 31-33
- Week of 9/5: Numbers 34-36

