

IN THE  
WILDERNESS

*a study on the book of Numbers*

# *schedule*

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WEEK 1  
*numbers 1-10*

## MEMORY VERSES

2 TIMOTHY 3:16–17

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

# DAY 1

## *introduction to numbers*

Did you have to play dodgeball in P.E. when you were growing up? Maybe you experienced the all-dreaded team picking event. Maybe you were always picked last. Let me tell you, I was certainly not picked first. But thankfully we didn't play much dodgeball when I was in elementary school. What we played most was red rover. And when it comes to red rover, being picked last to be "sent over" wasn't the worst thing. It was sort of a compliment, actually.

Maybe that is how we should view the book of Numbers, too. It is not a book that gets picked first. It is not a book that we talk about often. It is a book that is usually neglected and overlooked. But *every* book of the Bible is significant. Every book was inspired by God and every book is used by him to teach us. And sometimes, it is the least popular books that surprise us the most.

My prayer is that Numbers would surprise us. My prayer is that we would see the faithfulness of God in the censuses. My prayer is that we would see the righteousness of God in his laws. My prayer is that we would be overwhelmed by his patience and graciousness toward his people—time and time again.

Because *that* is the heart of the book of Numbers. In the midst of the Israelites' complaining, God remains good. In the midst of their disobedience, God remains righteous. In the midst of their unfaithfulness, God remains faithful. And even though we are reading about these events thousands of years later, *our God has not changed*. This God that we read about in Numbers is the same God that is good and righteous and faithful to us today. And this book of Numbers not only teaches us about his unchanging

character, but it also points—as all Old Testament books do—to the character and person of Jesus Christ.

Welcome to our study on Numbers.

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

A few months ago, I heard someone ask, “How should I read the Bible?” That is a good question. I think all of us, even mature believers, ask ourselves that from time to time. We could fill libraries with the books that have been written in response. Maybe you will want to look at those sometime. But for the time being, let me suggest just a few basic things here.

1. First, we always prepare our hearts for reading the Bible by praying. Yep, that’s right. Bible reading always starts with prayer. *Always*. Sometimes we might do this with a verse or a quote, but every day we will have a prompt to pray and prepare your heart for your time in God’s word. We should pray that the Holy Spirit would remove any distracting thoughts and help us focus our minds on him. We should pray that he would give us clarity to understand what we read. We should pray that he would give us wisdom to apply it to our lives. We should pray that he would help us to memorize and meditate on his word throughout our day. Bible reading always starts with *prayer*.
2. Then we actually read the Bible. (*Duh*, yes.) But we do so *carefully* and *intently*. How many times have you finished reading something only to ask yourself, *what on earth did I just read?* Sometimes it is hard for us to focus. (Hence the prayer beforehand.) It takes effort to read critically. It takes *practice* to read critically. We are not going to open our Bibles and magically find all sorts of insights on the first read. Some, maybe. But not a ton. We have to read the passage closely, and then read it again more closely. We ask questions about it. We

consider why the author used certain words and why he included certain details. We think about how it fits into the bigger picture. We point out what truths it teaches us about God. *This* is how we read the Bible. Carefully and intently.

The other side of careful reading is choosing an appropriate translation. There are several translations that are helpful for quick Bible reading, but when it comes to studying the Bible—carefully and intently—we need to be more selective. If the English translation strays too much from the underlying Hebrew, it becomes very difficult to analyze and interpret the passage. That’s why we stick to translations that are essentially literal (or close) when we study the Bible intently. Wayne Grudem provides a helpful chart for understanding which translations stick closely to the original biblical text (“literal” translations) and which are interpretations of the biblical text (“paraphrastic” translations). Be sure to use a translation toward the essentially literal side of the chart when you do your study.

A Spectrum of Translations <sup>1</sup>							
KJV	NRSV	NIV	GNB	NCV	CEV	LB	Message
NKJV	HCSB	NIVI	REB	GW			
RSV	NET	TNIV		NLT			
NASB							
ESV							
Essentially Literal	Mixed	Dynamic Equivalence		Very Paraphrastic			

After we read the passage and ask questions about it, then we will read some further background information and commentary about it. We will look at other verses in the Bible that may help us understand the passage better, and point out things that we may have missed during our initial reading.



3. The last part of each day will be thinking about how we can apply what we read to our lives. We will ask ourselves if our thoughts and actions reflect the character of God, and how we can become more like Christ. We will challenge ourselves to memorize Scripture and meditate on it throughout the day. We will think about songs we can listen to that reflect the biblical truths that we discussed.

4. And of course, we will always close with prayer.

Every day, we will go through these four parts: *prepare, read, apply, close*. We will have around 4 or 5 of these days in each week, and as you have already seen, there are 7 weeks in this study. Each week will also include a verse (or two) to memorize.

With that in mind, let's get to it!

## P R E P A R E

Start by taking a minute to focus your heart on Christ. Read (and reread) the verses below as you pray through them. Ask God to teach you through his word today and give you understanding.

*Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes;  
and I will keep it to the end.  
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law  
and observe it with my whole heart.*

Psalm 119:33–34



3. As you saw in your reading, the 12 tribes of Israel are mentioned constantly throughout the book of Numbers. Looking at chapter 1 (or just about anywhere in the book), write down the names of the 12 tribes.

1.

7.

2.

8.

3.

9.

4.

10.

5.

11.

6.

12.

4. Read Genesis 35:9–26. What did God promise? Where did the 12 tribes of Israel come from?

## INTRODUCTION TO NUMBERS

As we begin our study, let's take a minute to address the elephant in the room. *Why are we doing a study on Numbers?* Isn't it a book of boring censuses and irrelevant laws? Shouldn't we just jump ahead to the parts that apply to us today?

Well, in a word, *nope*.

It's easy to skip over parts of the Bible that are seemingly monotonous and outdated—trust me, I know. Just because I'm writing this study doesn't mean that I find censuses endlessly fascinating. But I also recognize, and I believe with all my heart, that God ordained every word of the Bible and every word has lasting significance for our lives today. In fact, this is exactly what the Bible claims for itself! Second Timothy 3:16–17 says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Notice that first word there: *all* Scripture. Not some. Not parts. *All* Scripture. That is why we must read *all* of Scripture!

But I am so guilty of not doing this. So often I just stick to the “popular” parts of Scripture. Ask me what I'm reading right now. Psalm 119. The Gospel of John. (Ok, ok. John is because the elders are preaching through it, so I have good reason for that one.) But it is *so easy* to stick with familiar, easy-to-understand, well-loved passages! What's hard is getting out of our comfort zone and challenging ourselves to *learn*. What's hard is actually growing in our biblical literacy. But if we truly believe in the words of 2 Timothy, and if we truly have a desire to know God, then we know that we must not be selective in our Bible reading. We must be comprehensive. And that is why we are studying the book of Numbers.

So let's get started.

Today we read the first 2 chapters of Numbers. But before we discuss them, we should go over a few background details for the book as a whole.

## SETTING

We know that Numbers opens “in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt” (1:1). So what we see in this book happens after the Israelites had left Egypt and after Moses had received the ten commandments from God at Sinai. But they haven’t left Sinai yet; they are still camped there and that is exactly where we pick up. In fact, the Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is *In the Wilderness*—which is a more fitting title since all of its contents occurs between Sinai and the subsequent wandering through the desert.

## STRUCTURE

We should also look at the structure of Numbers before we go further. There are several ways to organize the book, but I will offer a very basic one here to get started:

- I. Preparing to leave Sinai (chapters 1–10)
- II. The journey from Sinai to Moab (chapters 11–21)
- III. In the plains of Moab, preparing to enter the Promise Land (chapters 22–36)

What is remarkable about the book of Numbers is that throughout these three main sections, we see a surprising variety of genres. There are tribal lists, priestly instructions, military reports, divine dialogue, poetry, stories, and more. The book is a masterpiece of intricate and carefully constructed material.

## THEOLOGY

Most importantly, it is a book that teaches us about God. Sometimes we have a tendency to view the Old Testament as

irrelevant since we are no longer under the old covenants. But we must be careful to recognize that while the covenants between God and his people have changed, *our God has not*. Neither has human nature. So we can humbly approach Numbers with the confidence that we will grow in our understanding of ourselves and our God.

While we will discuss these in more detail as we go along, here are a few of the main theological themes we will see throughout the book:

- The character of God: his presence with his people (23:21), his holiness (4:19–20), his graciousness (11:1–2)
- The people of God: obedience and disobedience, unity and disunity, fulfillment of God’s promises to them (as evident in the population and censuses)
- Ritual worship: purification and sanctification through offerings
- The land: the people’s fulfillment or rejection of God’s promised inheritance, celebration of God’s abundant provision

## A P P L Y

Well, we have covered enough reading for one day. Now let’s take a few minutes to reflect before we close.

Starting a new Bible study is always exciting. It is full of hope and anticipation for the weeks to come. It is full of optimism and ambitious goals.

1. Why would you say you decided to do this study?

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2. I would guess that most of our answers have to do with understanding the Bible better, growing closer to God, being more disciplined in our devotional times. What are some specific spiritual goals that you want to work toward over the next few weeks?

3. We have different challenges to studying the Bible. Maybe you have young kids who wake up at the crack of dawn and prevent you from having any personal time. Maybe your work schedule is erratic and you struggle to establish any consistency with your devotions. Or heck, maybe you have all the time in the world, but taking on a serious study just seems too daunting or advanced to you. If you are being honest with yourself, what do you think will be the greatest hindrances to your daily time with God?

4. What steps do you need to take to remove these hindrances?



- > Today we talked about 2 Timothy 3:16–17. If you have never memorized those verses before, be sure to do it today. Write them on a post-it, set them as the background on your phone, find them in a song on YouTube—whatever you do, find a way to memorize those verses and think about them throughout the day.

## C L O S E

Before rushing back to the demands of the day, close your eyes and take a minute to focus your mind on Christ. Thank him for his word. Thank him for the wonderful privilege of studying it. Praise him that he breathed out these words, and that they are profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. Ask him to help you remember what you read and meditate on it today. Feel free to write down your prayer in the space below.

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:16–17

# DAY 2

*numbers 1-4*

## P R E P A R E

*For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.*

Romans 15:4

Start today by reading and praying through this verse. Ask God to instruct you through his Scripture, and to fill you with hope and encouragement as you read it. Feel free to write the verse or a prayer below.

## R E A D

> Yesterday we read Numbers 1 and 2. Today, read chapters 3 and 4.

1. When you are done reading, write down the main topic(s) of each of the four chapters.

Chapter 1:

Chapter 2:

Chapter 3:

Chapter 4:

2. Yesterday we read about where the 12 tribes of Israel came from, and that should help us understand the censuses. Why do these numbers matter? (Spoiler: check Genesis 35:11 again if you need to.)

3. Looking at 1:47–54, what are the general responsibilities of the Levites?

As you saw during your reading, the first four chapters of Numbers deal with the censuses of the tribes and the responsibilities of the Levites. (Exciting stuff, right? I thought so too.)

But regardless of the initial interest (or lack thereof), we know that every word of Scripture is there for a reason. And every piece of Scripture has something to teach us—if we are simply willing to learn from it. So what do we have to learn from these chapters? *A lot*. Let's go through it together.

## THE LORD SPOKE

The first thing we should notice about chapter 1 is something that we probably overlooked, but it is such an important detail! Look at the opening words: *The Lord spoke*. I know it is so easy to gloss over this phrase when we have read it so many times in the Bible, but this is such a significant statement—for a couple of reasons.

First, it is a significant theme throughout the book. Over 150 times in Numbers we are told that God said something to his people. God is *constantly* communicating with them! And that should tell us a lot about the character of God. *Our God is a God who desires us to know him*. He is not a God who is uninvolved or uninterested in his people; he is not a God who is silent or powerless to act in their lives. He is a God who not only wants his people to know him, but does so through human speech. Think about how extraordinary that is. In other ancient Near East religions, people sought signs from their gods through practices like examining the skies or dissecting the entrails of animals. In the Bible, *our God speaks to us directly*. And it is not just that God speaks to us, but his people speak back! It is not a divine monologue; it is divine dialogue. Our God is a God who desires us to know him and to know him *personally*. And throughout the book of Numbers, we should constantly be asking ourselves what God's speech teaches us about his himself.

Second, the fact that “the Lord spoke” is significant for our lives today. We do not have to wonder what he is like or what he wants us to do; we do not have to look for signs in the sky or in animals. We have the very words of God himself in our Bible! He has revealed himself to us and has told us who he is and how he wants us to live. He is the living, personal, known God. Whether through direct speech like here in Numbers or through the inspiration of the biblical authors, the Bible is the word of God.

## THE CENSUS

The next thing we should discuss is the census. (I mean, that's pretty hard not to acknowledge.) We cannot fully appreciate the significance of Numbers if we do not understand the significance of the numbers. And most likely, it is something that is not immediately obvious to us. So let's look at the elephant in the room. Why does the Lord command Moses to take a census?

The census matters for several reasons, and all of them trace back to God's promise to Jacob (*Israel*). In Genesis 35:11–12, God tells him,

*I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body. The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.*

God promises Jacob two things here: a nation and land. And throughout Numbers, we see the story of how God fulfills this promise.

Perhaps what is most obvious about the census is that it is the fulfillment of God's promise to make an entire nation out of one man. Jacob's name is changed to Israel, and his 12 sons became the 12 tribes of Israel. Then these 12 tribes grew to over 600,000 men—*not even including the Levites or the women and children!* This is a *massive* population. And it is direct proof of God's power and faithfulness. What God says he will do, he does. God always fulfills his promises.

Beyond this, we should also notice the phrase that is constantly repeated with each tribe: "their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war." I'm guessing you probably asked yourself, *what is the point of*

*repeating this with every single tribe?* What could have been listed in a few short sentences is dragged out into several verses. So what gives?

Well, the repetition is not there by coincidence; it serves a purpose. And it should tell us that the author is highlighting something. As you can see, this phrase has a specific military focus—which makes sense, since God promised to give them land. And because other people are occupying that land, they are about to make a conquest of it. And beyond that, it is no coincidence that the Lord commands the Israelites to camp by tribes and companies. They are organized in military formation, with God in their center, ready to march into their land.

God has built a nation out of Israel, and now he is preparing them to inherit the promised land.

*Do you see how every detail in this chapter points to the faithfulness and the power of our God?*

Our God fulfills his promises. *Always.*

But not only that, he prepares his people to receive those promises.

## A P P L Y

I once heard a pastor say, “The Bible is an inch deep and a mile wide. People keep looking for meaning that is just not there.” Maybe that is the impression you got when you first read these chapters. If you were like me, maybe you thought they seemed boring and unnecessary.

But nothing could be further from the truth! The Bible is indeed a very broad book, but it is far from shallow. It is the deepest book we will ever have. It is a never-ending fountain of truth and





3. Do your current Bible-reading habits and attitudes toward the Bible reflect the conviction that it truly is the word of God, through which he teaches and speaks to us today? If not, how do your habits need to change?

What should be abundantly clear from our reading today in Numbers is the fact that our God is *faithful*. We can trust that he always fulfills his promises. Sometimes we know this in our head, but we question it in our heart. Sometimes God is faithful in ways that we do not recognize or understand. Sometimes it takes months or even years for us to see his faithfulness in perspective.

One of my favorite examples of this truth comes from Ben and Ani. Several years ago, Ben was appointed to serve on the city council

of Peoria. He continued in his position until it came time for elections. The Tomas knew that God had called him to politics, and they knew God had provided the way. He would certainly provide the way again. They worked tirelessly during the campaign and trusted the outcome to the Lord.

Only... Ben didn't win the election. He lost by *40 votes*, and he no longer had a position on city council—which was weird, since God had undeniably placed him there in the first place. They didn't know what to do. How was God working through all of this? Why would he lead them on if Ben was just going to lose the election?

Well, it's funny how God works. He often has much bigger plans for us than we could have ever imagined.

While Ben was on city council, he got to know representative Lovas. And shortly after Ben lost the city council election, Lovas was appointed to another position. His place as representative needed to be filled immediately. Guess who he thought of first? He called Ben right away and told him how to apply for the new emergency appointment.

And here's the thing—if Ben had not lost the city council race, he would not have been eligible for the House of Representatives. And if he had not been appointed to city council in the first place, he never would have made all the connections that led him to be a representative! God worked out every detail necessary to get Ben to the House of Representatives, and now he is serving as the majority leader. As Ani says, sometimes when God takes away a lesser dream, he replaces it with a much greater one!

*What a wonderful truth.* God often has much bigger plans for us than we could ever have imagined. And he is always faithful. It may take weeks or months or years for us to understand it, but we can trust that God always fulfills his promises.

4. Is there anything going on in your life right now where you struggle to see his faithfulness?

5. What examples of God's faithfulness in your past can you think of to remind yourself of his faithfulness in your current situation?

## C L O S E

Before you head into the busyness of the day, take a minute to pray.

- > Thank God for his word and his faithfulness.
- > Ask him to help you see his faithfulness in your life.
- > Pray that he would increase your love and excitement for his word.

*God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.  
Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?*

Numbers 23:19

## WEEK 1 MEMORY VERSE

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

# DAY 3

*numbers 5-6*

## P R E P A R E

*Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.*

1 Samuel 12:24

Prepare your heart today by praying that he would help you fear him and serve him faithfully. Ask him to help you consider the great things he has done for you. Ask him to give you wisdom to understand and apply today's passage to your life.

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 5–6.

1. As we should ask ourselves any time we read the Bible, what does this passage teach us about God? Don't overthink this; just jot down some truths about God that we find in these chapters.

2. Who is the only one who speaks throughout the chapters?  
Why is that significant?

## T A B E R N A C L E

Before we hop into the instructions of the Lord, let's discuss the importance of Israelite worship. We know that God is preparing his people to march into the promised land. Part of that preparation—part of what it means to simply be the people of God—is to worship him. Like we saw in our previous readings, the Lord appointed the Levites to the service of the tabernacle in 1:47–54 and 3:1–4:49. What you may have noticed is missing, however, is the reason why the tabernacle was necessary and how it came about. That is found in Exodus and Leviticus. We must remember throughout our study of Numbers is that it is a piece of the larger story that extends across the first five books of the Bible—the entire *Pentateuch*. And when it comes to the tabernacle specifically, we find its construction in Exodus, its services in Leviticus, and the Levitical duties of it in Numbers.

So let's take a minute to find out how the tabernacle got to this point in the story.

1. Look up Exodus 24:15–25:9. Where was Moses when God gave him the instructions for the tabernacle? Why did God instruct the people to make him a sanctuary?
2. Then look up Exodus 40:33–38. What filled the tabernacle?
3. Lastly, look at Leviticus 15:31 and 19:1. Why was the tabernacle necessary for the people of Israel?

It is easy to miss the history and significance of the tabernacle if we only read Numbers, but when we read these other passages, we should be overwhelmed by the fact that the tabernacle *is the very dwelling place of the glory of God*.

And not just that, but it is God himself who initiates this! It is God himself who desires to dwell in the midst of his people! He makes a place for himself on earth, because he desires them to know and love and obey him. Our God is a God who is *immanent*, meaning he is deeply involved with his creation and his people. And his dwelling place becomes the center of the Israelite camp (2:2). Both physically and spiritually, everything that the Israelites do is to be

centered around their God. They are a people who are dedicated to him, who are holy as he is holy.

The problem, of course, is that humans are *not* holy (on their own, at least), and what is unholy cannot be in the presence of what is holy. That is exactly why the Lord commands the Levites to camp around the tabernacle, between the tabernacle and the people. They guard the people from the glory and the presence of the Lord, “so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel” (1:53). So we see that God is immanent—he is active in the lives of his people, dwells among them, and makes himself known to them—but at the same time, we see that he is separate from them. His holiness presents a barrier between himself and his people. He is *transcendent*, or far greater than and independent of his creation.

And in the descriptions of the tabernacle, we see both of these characteristics, both the immanence and transcendence of God. He is the all-powerful Creator of the universe, fully sufficient in himself and needing nothing from his creation. And yet our God is actively involved in the lives of his people. He has made himself known and desires his people to know him intimately.

#### PURIFICATION LAWS

In chapters 5 and 6, this barrier between a holy God and his unholy people is addressed. Here, the Lord addresses four different areas of uncleanness and what do to about them. Write down those areas below.

(1) 5:1–4:

(2) 5:5–10:

(3) 5:11–31:



(4) 6:1–21:

Take a minute to think about the placement of these instructions in the book of Numbers. This is only the second year after the Israelites had come out of Egypt. What are they to do with this newfound freedom? How do they become a nation? Where do they go from here?

*God is answering those questions and preparing them.* They have been counted and organized by tribe around the tabernacle. The Levites have been assigned their specific responsibilities of taking down, setting up, and protecting the tabernacle. God is giving them all these instructions while they are still camped at Sinai, so that they will be prepared and ready to move when they set out for the promised land in just a few chapters.

If they are to be established as their own nation, the *Lord's* nation, they need instructions for living according to the law of the Lord. And that is exactly what we see here.

#### UNCLEAN PEOPLE

Let's talk about these categories now. The first category (5:1–4) requires that anyone who is unclean remain outside the camp. This "unclean" category includes anyone who is leprous (which entails a variety of skin diseases), has a discharge, or has come in contact with a dead body.

But the obvious question here is, *why?* Why are these people considered unclean and why must they be separated? Well, the obvious answer is that these conditions present a medical hazard to the primitive, nomadic community. Separating the sick (or potentially sick, in the case of touching the dead) from the rest of the community would clearly help to mitigate the spread of disease. But more importantly, the reason that these people are

unclean and must be separated is because their God is a holy God—and *he was dwelling among his people*. It is specifically because of the *presence* of the holy God that the Israelites must be holy too, lest they “defile their camp” (v. 3).

#### CONFESSION AND RESTITUTION

The second category (5:5–10) has to do with moral transgressions. We would be wrong to think that only physical ailments could destroy the community; moral ailments are just as dangerous. And as people who reflect the character of their God, they must be morally pure as well as physically pure. The instructions here address when someone has wronged another person, and how they must confess and make restitution.

At this point, it would be easy to gloss over these verses. I mean, confessing your sin and making it right isn’t exactly surprising to see in the Bible. But we *cannot* undervalue this passage! Like we have mentioned before, we should constantly be asking ourselves, *what do these verses teach us about God?* And here, they teach us an important truth: *our merciful God provides the solution to sin.*

This is just as important for us today as it was for the Israelites, and it should have a huge impact on the way that we live our lives. First, even before Christ came to earth, God provided a way for his people to be forgiven and restored to him. Every sacrifice in the Old Testament is a direct foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ. And when we read about these sacrifices, they should point us to Christ—the ultimate sacrifice. God provided his son as the solution for sin so that we may be free from its bondage and have fellowship with our God.

Second, this truth should give us confidence about where we stand with God. When you do something wrong, you do not have to wonder how to fix it or if you are right with God. The Bible tells us, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). There is no uncertainty; there is no doubt about it. When we confess our sins, we are forgiven. We are made right with God. We do not have to question if he is still upset with us or holding a grudge against us. Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” Because our God is a God who provides the solution to sin, we do not have to bear our guilt and shame. Christ has taken it for us. So when Satan tempts us to question whether we are truly forgiven, when he fills us with guilt over past sins we have already confessed, when he tells us that God is still angry or disappointed or disgusted with us, we remind ourselves of this truth. *Our God is a God who provides the solution for sin*—not a one-time solution, but the solution for all time. Christ dealt with sin once and for all. And for those who have confessed their sin to him, we never have to question our forgiveness.

#### ADULTERY

And now, after this rather normal command for confession and restitution, we have a... less normal... command. This passage is totally bizarre to us today; there is no getting around that. But any time we have questions about the Bible, we must simply dig deeper and we will find answers.

So, how do we make sense of this? Well, there are a few things we have to point out in the text.

1. First, this was not some superstitious, magical practice. This was a *sacred* practice. It was held in the tabernacle under the direction of a priest, with a drink that was made of holy water and dust from the tabernacle. This was not merely an arbitrary ruse meant for a jealous husband to get revenge on his wife; this was a sacred practice instituted by the Lord, and everything had to do with holiness. The curse itself was entirely

- dependent on whether the woman was clean (holy) or unclean (unholy).
2. Second, the practice on its own is entirely safe. Drinking water and dirt does not cause pain, a swollen womb, or withering thighs. In other ancient Near Eastern religions, the accused were forced put their hands in boiling water or grab a red-hot instrument, with the resulting burn seen as proof of their guilt.<sup>2</sup> The biblical test for adultery is nothing like this. The proof of guilt rests in the hands of God alone, not the ordinary laws of nature.
  3. Third, every part of the practice was controlled. There is never a point at which the priest or jealous husband may take matters into their own hands and inflict their own idea of “justice.” The curse is only brought on by a righteous, omniscient God, not by vengeful human beings.

Though it seems strange on the surface, the adultery test was a legitimate way for the primitive people to ensure their holiness. Not only would justice be served for the individual woman (whether guilty or innocent), but the verdict would send a message to the rest of the community: holiness within marriage was non-negotiable.

#### NAZARITE VOW

After the adultery test, the Nazarite vow seems like a downright snoozefest. But we have an entire chapter devoted to its instructions. So what was this vow, what does it teach us about God, and why is it important for us today?

Before you conjure up images of youth group boys trying to impress girls by making vows to God, let’s talk through the seriousness of the commitment. We know that the Levites were specifically conscripted to guard the tent of meeting, but the Nazarite vow was voluntary. Anyone—man or woman from any tribe—who wished to offer their time and service to the Lord could

make this vow. The passage mentions details like “the days” of the separation and the completion of the separation, which show that it was intended to be for a specific period of time. However, Samson and perhaps even Samuel were dedicated to be lifelong Nazarites by their parents before they were even born. And as you probably read in your Bible’s footnotes, the term Nazarite meant *separated or devoted to God*. Whatever their vow may have been, it involved denying one’s self and serving God. It was a total surrender of themselves in order to serve God and others.

In the Old Testament, we see Manoah’s wife undertaking the vow at the command of an angel. Though barren, the angel told her she would conceive and must follow the requirements of the vow. But not only that, she was to extend the vow to her son, for “the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Judges 13:5). Can you guess who her son was now? Yep, Samson. (Read the whole story in Judges 13 when you can—it is absolutely worth the time.) Samuel was also a Nazarite. He was a “man of God” (1 Sam 9:6) who fasted, prayed to the Lord for the people, and built an altar to God.

In the New Testament, John the Baptist was devoted from before his birth (Lk 1:15). His ministry of calling the people to repentance and preparing the way for Christ is unparalleled. In fact, Jesus said, “among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist” (Mt 11:11). It seems that Paul had also taken a Nazarite vow, since Acts 18:18 says, “At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.” In fact, the church historian Josephus records that these vows were popular in the first century AD.<sup>3</sup> Though Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament law and established a new covenant, we see the timeless truth that the ultimate goal of all believers is to honor and serve God.

## A P P L Y

It might be tempting to see these chapters as boring and irrelevant to us under the new covenant of Christ—but this is a misunderstanding of Scripture! As we know, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). And when we encounter passages that seem confusing or insignificant on the surface, we take the time to dig deeper and find treasure.

Like we pointed out today, nearly all the words in these chapters come from the Lord himself. That should teach us a lot about God.

1. How did the Nazarite vow foreshadow the life and ministry of Christ?

2. Beyond the Nazarite vow, think about the other three categories that we discussed today: unclean people, confession and restitution, and adultery. What passages can you think of where Jesus addressed these kinds of people? How did he treat them?

## C L O S E

Before we close today, I'd like to share with you one of my *many* embarrassing stories. Do you ever have those moments when your mind just goes blank? Well, this happened to me a few years ago in seminary. I had a friend there named Caroline, who was incredibly smart and well-known around the school for being such a wonderful student. (Actually, she was getting her Ph.D. in English from ASU while casually adding on a master's degree from Phoenix Seminary. I mean, why not?) We ran into each other one day at school and she asked me how my classes were going. I said they were good and told her about them. Then she asked about my Hebrew narrative class. (Yep, I definitely knew I was in Hebrew narrative and I was working on a huge course paper.) But then she asked me what the paper was about, and my mind went totally blank. What my paper was about? What *was* my paper about? I had no idea. I mean, 1 Kings for sure. I knew that much. But which chapter? And what was that chapter about? I had been working on it for weeks, but in that moment, I could not remember for the life of me what it was about.

And you know what? The same thing happens with our Bible reading. It has nothing to do with paying attention. It has nothing to do with a lack of sincerity or intelligent life. It simply has to do with being a human. As humans, we are forgetful. We can read our Bibles, be touched by the verses, notice things we never saw before, think about how wonderful our God is... and then totally forget about it an hour later.

Which is why we have to be intentional. And it doesn't take much. I find that simply taking a minute to reflect on what I read and write it down is more than enough. So that is what we will practice throughout this study. What I like to do is identify the passage, what it is about, why it is important for me today, and what verse/biblical truth I will meditate on for the day. I know it sounds



like a lot, but I'm talking about just a couple sentences here. This is what it might look like for yesterday's reading:

**Passage:** Numbers 1–4

**What it is about:** Censuses of the Israelites while they are still at Sinai, how the tribes should camp around the tabernacle, and responsibilities of the Levites

**Why it is important:** God is fulfilling his promises to Jacob to build a nation out of him and give his descendants the promised land, and he is preparing them to take that land.

**Biblical truth:** *God is always faithful. God always keeps his promises.*

You may like to do this differently, and that is perfectly fine. But however you decide to do it, be intentional about remembering what you read. Try it for yourself for today's passage.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on:**

- > Then close in prayer before you head back to the busyness of life. Ask God to help you remember and meditate on the truths you read today. Ask him to open your eyes to see his faithfulness throughout your day.

WEEK 1 MEMORY VERSE

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

# DAY 4

*numbers 7-8*

## P R E P A R E

Prepare yourself for your devotional time today by directing your thoughts to Christ's sacrifice. Praise him for his purifying blood, and ask for wisdom to see how the Old Testament sacrifices pointed directly to him.

*For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

Hebrews 9:13–14

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 7 and 8.

1. Let's start with some simple questions here. When did chapter 7 take place? Over how long of a period were the offerings made?



## TRIBAL OFFERINGS

Did you know that Numbers 7 is the second longest chapter in the Bible? Some of you might be thinking right now, *Yeah, I gathered that as I was reading. Thanks.* Excellent. Glad we're on the same page.

But as we know, even the seemingly mundane chapters of the Bible include important truths for us today. (*Have I mentioned that yet?*) All we need to do is dig a little deeper and ask ourselves what it teaches us about God. So before we discuss this chapter, spend some time thinking through its importance.

5. What themes does chapter 7 touch on that are relevant for our lives today? What timeless truths does it teach us?

If your mind went blank at this question, don't worry—we can work through this together. Yes, chapter 7 is long. Yes, chapter 7 is repetitive. But those elements are not meaningless. They are intentional. And they are *theological*. Walk with me here.

First, the chapter begins with a huge event in the lives of the Israelites—the tabernacle was completed! We must not overlook the significance of this event. The tabernacle is the place where the Israelites are made clean (holy) and right with their God. It is the very dwelling place of God among his people. It is tempting to say that it is the center of the spiritual life of the people, but the Israelites are nothing without their God. Therefore, it is the center of *life itself* for the Israelite people. And now it is complete. This marks a milestone for the Israelites, who have escaped Egypt and have been waiting at Sinai for a permanent land of their own. Now they are ready to leave—now they are ready to inherit their promised land! This was a momentous day, indeed.

And the rest of the chapter presents significant biblical themes—themes that are still important for our lives today. Let's go over some of these.

- *Generosity*. Did you notice why the tribes brought the offerings of wagons and oxen? There is no reason. It was simply out of their own generosity. These were heartfelt, voluntary gifts, unsolicited by the Lord or the Levites or Moses. In fact, they were so surprising and unanticipated that the Lord specifically commanded Moses to accept them! Surely he would not have known what to do with them if the Lord had not told him first. *This should remind us that generosity is a fundamental part of true worship.* We do not worship in songs or words alone; we worship by being generous and sharing what we have. Second Corinthians 9:6–7 says, “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart,

not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

- *Community cooperation.* Perhaps you noticed that the 12 tribal chiefs offered 6 wagons—meaning, one wagon was given for every two tribes. So not only were the offerings heartfelt and spontaneous, but the tribes collaborated together to gift them. They saw a need and worked together to meet it. That is a beautiful picture of the love and partnership that should exist among God’s people. Each person has a specific role, and together we make a difference for God’s kingdom. Think about what John said about the traveling missionaries: “For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. *Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth*” (3 Jn 8). We may have different roles, but as believers, we are all fellow workers for the gospel.
- *Communion with God.* The massive volume of offerings and their repetition in verses 12–88 speaks to the seriousness with which the Israelites approached communion with their God. This was not something they took lightly; this was of the utmost value to them. While the costliness of the offerings is probably what is most noticeable to us, we must think, too, about the labor that has gone into these offerings. Skilled metalworkers shaped the plates and basins and dishes, grain was ground into fine flour, olives were pressed for oil, incense was created out of plants—a *great deal* of time and resources went into these offerings. And all of it expresses their devotion to God. To the Israelites, the tabernacle was not merely a tent in the middle of their camp; it was the holy meeting place between themselves and their God. And they valued that communion deeply.

At the end of the list of the dedication offerings, we have one final verse in the chapter. Moses entered the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, and the Lord shows up. The fact that Moses is allowed to enter the tent and speak to God—*and God speaks back!*—is astounding on its own, but this verse is even more than God speaking to Moses. This verse is another fulfillment of God’s promises. In Exodus 25:22, the Lord said to Moses,

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

And what happens here, as soon as the tabernacle and its dedication are completed? The Lord speaks to Moses “from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim.”

*God is once again fulfilling his promises. He is always faithful to fulfill his promises.*

#### LEVITE CLEANSING

Now that the tabernacle is ready, the Levites can be cleansed in preparation for their service. Most of this process is straightforward. The Levites must shave, wash their clothes, and cleanse themselves. Then they take a bull and its grain offering, along with another bull for the sin offering. After this, the Levites and the bulls are brought in front of the tent of meeting before all the Israelites.

And this is where things get a little strange. (Strange for us, at least.) To understand this process, we need to understand the way that sacrifices were made. The worshipper would lay his hands on the animal, symbolically making the animal a substitute for themselves. After the animal had been chopped up, the priest



would wave its breast and retain that portion for himself. Traditionally, the “wave” has been considered moving the breast horizontally from side to side.<sup>4</sup>

With the whole assembly of Israel laying hands on the Levites, it showed that the Levites had become a substitute for all the firstborn of Israel. And with Aaron offering the Levites as a wave offering, they were symbolically given to Aaron and the priests for their service. What becomes clear in this chapter is that the Levites were being substituted for all the firstborns of Israel. In Exodus 13:2, the Lord tells Moses, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.” This is exactly what the Lord repeats here in 8:17. But instead of taking the firstborn from every family to give to the Lord, the Lord substitutes the Levites (16, 18). They will be the ones “to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel” (8:19). In other words, the Lord is substituting specific people to perform the duties required to keep the people holy.

We also see a second kind of substitution here. The Levites are substituted for all the firstborns in Israel, but the bulls are also substituted for the sins of the Levites. In order to perform their holy duties, the Levites would first need to be purified. And they do that through the sacrifice of the bulls (12). The Levites place their hands on the heads of the bulls, symbolically transferring their sin to the bulls and offering the bulls’ lives in place of their own. This is the act of atonement—it is the means of reconciliation between man and God.

## A P P L Y

Is any of this sounding vaguely familiar?

*That is exactly what Jesus did for us.*

He took our sin upon himself and died in our place. He sacrificed himself to purify us and make atonement for us. He is our holy substitute. That is why we refer to his death as *substitutionary atonement*. Though the Levites offered bulls to die as the substitute for their sin, Christ offered himself to die as the substitute for our sin.

And when God looks at us, he credits Christ's sacrifice to us. It is not that God simply forgets our sins; it is not that he pretends they never happened. It is that our sins were paid for in full by Christ's death. He considers Christ's righteousness to be our own. We call this *imputation*, which means that "God thinks of Christ's righteousness as belonging to us, or regards it as belonging to us. He 'reckons' it to our account."<sup>5</sup> And the opposite can be said too. God considers our unrighteousness as belonging to Christ, since he took it upon himself in full on the cross. So we end up with *double imputation*, since God credits our unrighteousness to Christ and his righteousness to us.

All because Christ sacrificed himself as the substitute for our sin.

And he did so once and for all.

The Old Testament sacrifices purified the people to live in the presence of their holy God, but it did not take away their sins—*for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins* (Heb 10:4). That is exactly why they had to keep offering sacrifices over and over again. If the sacrifices were truly effective, they would have ceased to offer them (Heb 10:2).

But when Christ came into the world, he offered a perfect sacrifice. Only his blood could sufficiently pay the price of sin. That is why Hebrews continually emphasizes the finality and the effectiveness of his death; he is the one true sacrifice that every Old Testament sacrifice points to.

*He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself (Heb 7:27).*

*He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption (Heb 9:12).*

*Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (Heb 9:25–26).*

*And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb 10:9–14).*

Every sacrifice that we read about in the Old Testament points to Christ, because his was the one true sacrifice. He made the atonement for sin once and for all—and he did so in our place. He substituted himself as the sacrifice we could never make.

## C L O S E

Take a minute to reflect on these truths.

1. How should the doctrines of substitutionary atonement and double imputation bring great comfort and peace to your life today?

Close today by praying through these words and listing to “Before the Throne” today. (And of course, don’t forget to review this week’s memory verses.)

*Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong and perfect plea;  
a great High Priest whose name is Love,  
who ever lives and pleads for me.  
My name is graven on his hands,  
my name is written on his heart.  
I know that while in heav'n he stands  
no tongue can bid me thence depart,  
no tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair  
and tells me of the guilt within,  
upward I look and see him there  
who made an end of all my sin.  
Because the sinless Savior died,  
my sinful soul is counted free;  
for God the just is satisfied  
to look on him and pardon me,  
to look on him and pardon me.*

*Behold him there, the risen Lamb,  
my perfect, spotless righteousness,  
the great unchangeable I AM,  
the King of glory and of grace.  
At one with him, I cannot die;  
my soul is purchased by his blood.  
My life is hid with Christ on high,  
with Christ my Savior and my God,  
with Christ my Savior and my God.*

WEEK 1 MEMORY VERSE

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

# DAY 5

*numbers 9-10*

## P R E P A R E

The first week of our study is always the hardest. Just getting through all the background information takes a while. Maybe this week was a lot for you. Maybe it has been hard to establish a daily time of reading and prayer. Whatever you are feeling right now, let me take a minute to say, *well done*. You made it through a great deal of reading, questions, and prayer this week.

Keep up the good work. You are doing *great*.

Start your devotional time today by reading Exodus 34:4–6.

So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the first. And he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand two tablets of stone. The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.*

Pray that God would open your eyes to see his mercy, grace, patience, steadfast love, and faithfulness today. Pray that he would give you an attentive mind to focus on our passage and understand it clearly.

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 9 and 10.

1. Even in the first few days of our study, we have covered several themes of Numbers. What themes do you see repeated in chapters 9 and 10?



During the first 8 chapters of Numbers, the Lord gives Moses instructions for the Israelites to keep. This section is about *laws*. But here in chapter 9, we see a change occur. Now, the genre is *narrative*—which simply means the telling of a story. And the book of Numbers constantly alternates between these two genres. Law and narrative are woven together in such a way that we see the laws, and then we see the action that results from those laws in the narrative. And beyond that, the stories themselves function like a sort of law, in that they teach morals through their action. So while we read law differently than we read narrative, we understand that the two genres function interdependently within the book. As we go further, we will continue to see them alternate and we will see how they function together.

#### PASSOVER

Before we talk about this section, let's think through a few questions.

2. When is the Passover celebrated? For those who are unclean at that time, when does the Lord tell them to celebrate the Passover?

3. What do we learn about the character of God when he allows unclean people to postpone observing the Passover until the second month (vv. 10–12)? Or when he allows sojourners to keep the Passover too?
4. How do the Passover instructions point to Christ? (Spoiler: see John 19:36 and 6:53.)

What should be obvious to us is that this passage clearly does not focus on the general instructions (or *laws*) for observing the Passover, which are found in Exodus 12. Instead, this passage focuses on the interaction between God and his people (*narrative*). And that should tell us something.

First, it tells us about the people. The Israelites obeyed the Lord: “According to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so the people of Israel did” (9:5). In fact, we have seen this phrase repeated several times so far (1:54, 2:34, 5:4, 8:20). The Israelites have done everything that the Lord has commanded them so far, and as we see with the presence of the cloud, God blesses them for it.

Second, it tells us about God—in fact, it tells us *a lot* about God. Before the Israelites even leave Egypt, God commands them to keep the Passover. Before the final plague, he says, “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast” (Ex 12:14). The Israelites know they must keep the Passover, but God still reminds them.

Because *our God is a gracious God*.

Do you ever get the feeling that God begrudgingly puts up with you? Like you are just a burden when you go to him with your requests?

When we read this story about God, we see how gracious he is. We see how he tenderly cares for his people and guides them every step of the way. And we should remind ourselves that this is the same God we have today. He never tires of helping those who seek him. And he looks upon you with more affection and patience that you could ever imagine.

*The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

Psalm 103:8

The other thing that is so remarkable about God reminding his people to keep the Passover is that he does not address unclean people then. Think about this for a minute. God is omniscient; he knows everything. He knew that a person would die on the Passover—*after all, he is the one who gives and takes life*—and that these men would become unclean. And he knew that they would go to Moses wondering what to do. But when he gave them the original instructions to keep the Passover in Egypt (Ex 12), and even now when he reminds them of it (Num 9), he never addresses unclean people. He waits until the people ask Moses and Moses asks him.

And I think there is a huge implication for us here: *God desires us to communicate with him, and he delights to answer our prayer.*

Let me say that again.

*God desires us to communicate with him, and he delights to answer our prayer.*

You are not a burden when you go to him with your questions. You are not a burden when you bring him your requests. You are not a burden when you pour out your anxiety to him. God desires you to communicate with him, and he delights to answer your prayer.

*What a gracious God we have.*

So gracious, in fact, that he became the Passover lamb himself. He was slaughtered, without one bone broken, that his perfect blood would pay for our sins once and for all. The Passover served to remind the people of God's mighty power and deliverance of his

people, but it also reminded them that blood was required for their deliverance. And Jesus shed his blood for our deliverance. He was the perfect, righteous sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

This is exactly what we are told in Hebrews 7:26–27:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

This is exactly what we talked about yesterday. Christ sacrificed himself in our place, once and for all. There is no greater expression of love than that. *What a gracious God we have, indeed.*

#### CLOUD COVERING

Switching gears now, let's start with a little exercise, shall we?

- > Look at verse 18 and underline the first sentence.
- > Now look down to verse 23 and underline the first sentence.
- > Now read everything in between those two sentences. Yes, go read them. I'll wait.
- > What do you notice?

Let me point something out, if I may. *Those lines and everything in between them are pointless.* Do you see that? This section is entirely redundant. Completely unnecessary. There is no new information added. It does nothing to further the storyline. It simply repeats the same information that was already given in verses 15–17. *So why have it at all?*

Because the cloud tested the people's trust in God. And we are shown, throughout all of these "pointless" verses, that the Israelites obeyed. They obeyed when it made sense and they obeyed when it didn't. They followed the leading of their God. God did his part to guide, and the people did their part to obey.

The fact that the cloud appeared at all is a testament to their obedience. His visible presence among them in the cloud is a response to their obedience in building the tabernacle according to his commands (9:15). Notice, too, that the cloud appeared right after the Israelites celebrated the Passover—which is exactly what happened during the first Passover, when the Israelites were still in Egypt.

The Lord always guides those who obey and seek him.

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

Psalm 16:11

At this point in Numbers, the Israelites have done nothing but obey. But that is quickly coming to an end. Beginning with chapter 11, the rest of the book is a grave warning to those who know what God has commanded but do not obey.

## LEAVING SINAI

All of this preparation—the entire first nine chapters of Numbers—finally culminates in the Israelites departing the wilderness of Sinai. A mere twenty days after the Lord gives Moses the command to count the people, they set out in stages.

And once again, we see a repetition of what each tribe did. They were 12 distinct tribes, but they were 12 tribes working together. Each tribe had its own job to do in order for the nation to set out. And they set out not at their own discretion, but at the leading of

the Lord. Here begins the second major section in the book of Numbers. The people, organized by their tribes and complete with their tabernacle, are ready to begin their journey to the promised land.

## A P P L Y

Our passage today taught us several things about the character of God. Take a minute to think through the truths we discussed:

- God is gracious.
  - God desires us to communicate with him, and he delights to answer our prayer.
  - God always guides those who obey him.
1. Do you struggle to believe any of these truths? Why?

2. How do you view God when you pray to him?

3. Does this match up with the biblical truths about God we discussed today?

4. Would your prayer life look different if you truly believed that God wants you to pray to him and delights to answer your prayer?



## C L O S E

It's that time again. You know what to do.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on:**

Before you jump back into the busyness of life, take a moment to praise God for his graciousness, his guidance, and his desire to communicate with you.

If you haven't memorized the verses for this week yet, be sure to do that today.

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

2 Timothy 3:16–17

WEEK 2  
*numbers 11-12*

## MEMORY VERSE

PSALM 103:8

The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

# DAY 1

*numbers 11*

## P R E P A R E

We have said it before and we will say it again: everything in the Old Testament points to Christ. Just as the manna we will read about today sustained the Israelites in the wilderness, so Christ sustains us in our every need. Take a moment to center your heart on him, and ask him to teach you through his word today.

*I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*

John 6:48–51

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 10:29–11:35.

1. Part of good Bible reading is asking good questions of the text. What questions do you have after reading this chapter?

2. What themes or lessons do you see here?

3. Scan through the chapter again. How would you characterize these people?

- The Israelites

- Moses

- The Lord

4. What “misfortunes” (11:1) of the Israelites?

#### THE PEOPLE COMPLAIN

We started our reading today by looking at the end of chapter 10. And there is a good reason for that: the beginning of chapter 11 marks a distinct shift in the book. All we have seen so far is obedience and blessing, but that is about to change. And it all starts with the Israelites complaining in 11:1.

To fully understand their complaints, we need to look at this verse again. The text literally says, “And so it happened when the people were complaining about evil (or lamenting over evil) in the ears of the Lord, the Lord heard and became angry.” Two things we should notice here. First, the verse starts with “and so it happened.” We’ll come back to that in a minute. Second, the text literally says they were complaining or lamenting over *evil*. The ESV brings this out as “misfortunes” and the NASB as “adversity”—but the text literally says *evil*. At this point, we should be thinking to ourselves... *are you kidding me?* The Lord brought ten plagues on Egypt, he protected them from the death of their firstborns, he led them out of slavery, he parted the Red Sea for them to cross on dry land, he drowned the Egyptians chasing them, he sent bread from heaven to feed them, he gave them water from rocks in their thirst—and *the people are complaining about the “evil” brought on them?* You have got to be kidding me. It is a miracle that the Lord did not smite them with the fire in 11:2. *He is gracious indeed.*

But take another look at the end of chapter 10. In verse 32, we see Moses mention the *good* that the Lord has promised to Israel—which contrasts the *evil* the Israelites lament over in 11:1. And in verse 35, we see the same opening phrase: “and so it happened.” Ok, now I realize that the ESV does not translate it like that, but that is what the text literally says. And this is important to recognize because we see a very significant structure here. We talked about the shift that occurs between these chapters, right? Take a look at how we can see this structurally:

- A Yahweh has promised *good* things for Israel (10:32)
- B So it happened that the ark set out (10:35)
- C Rise up, O Lord (10:35b)
- C’ Return, O Lord (10:36)
- B’ So it happened that the people complained (11:1)
- A’ *Evil* in the hearing of Yahweh (11:1)<sup>6</sup>

If you have been with us in our previous studies, you probably recognize this form. It is called a *chiasm*, where certain words or themes are repeated in a pattern. As you can see, this chiasm follows an ABCCBA pattern. In the “A” lines, we can see a contrast between the good from God and the evil from the people. In the “B” lines, we see the repetition of the phrase, “And so it happened,” and a contrast between obedience (the ark setting out) and disobedience (the people complaining).

And then we get to the “C” lines. The most important lines in a chiasm are found in the center. The structure literally *points* to them. And in this chiasm, the most important lines are found in the prayers of Moses. *Arise, O Lord. Return, O Lord.*

This is very telling. First, it shows the character of Moses. He was a man who *prayed*. He was constantly communicating with the Lord, and we should follow that example today. Second, it shows the importance of prayer. Because of Moses’ righteous prayer, the Lord was merciful to him and the Israelites again and again. (Makes you think twice about the fervency of your own prayers, doesn’t it?) Third, these prayers foreshadow the rest of the book. We see the continual pattern of the people disobeying, Moses praying on their behalf, and the Lord responding graciously to his pleas.

Are you starting to see the themes of the entire book played out in just these few verses? This is a huge reversal for Israel! This a pivotal moment in the book. Everything in the first set of ABC is characterized by obedience and blessing; everything in the second set is characterized by disobedience and evil. And in the very center, we see Moses’ pleas to the Lord. In the very center, we find the power of prayer. In the very center, we find a good and gracious God.



5. How would you characterize your prayer life?

6. Look at verse 2 and 17. How does God respond to Moses' prayers? Would your prayers look different if you believed God would respond to you in that way?

What we should also point out about the people complaining is that this is the first in a series of rebellion. In fact, between here and chapter 26, rebellion is the name of the game. They complain of their misfortunes (11:1–4), they complain about their food (11:4–35), they challenge Moses’ authority (12:1–16), they reject the promised land (13:1–14:45), they assemble against Moses (16:1–19:22), they complain about their food and water (20:2–9), Moses disobeys (20:10–13), they complain about their food and water again (21:4–9), and they worship Baal at Peor (25:1–9).

It’s not sounding too good for the Israelites, is it? *This book is a perpetual warning about disobeying the Lord.* We constantly see the cycle of disobedience, divine judgment, and Moses praying for relief. And what should we learn from it? Well, number one, *do not disobey the Lord.* We can be sure that we only bring suffering and misfortune upon ourselves when we disobey. But, number two, *thank God for number two,* God is gracious to us when we call out to him. He is gracious to forgive us. He is gracious to ease our punishment. He is gracious not to treat us as we deserve.

*The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
He will not always chide,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.  
He does not deal with us according to our sins,  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

Psalm 103:8–10

#### ELDERS APPOINTED

Now after all this talk about Moses’ righteous prayers and the wonderful example of faith we see in 10:35–36 and 11:2, we see him complaining to God that his burdens are too much to bear. He doesn’t seem all that different than the people at this point! Look at his complaint in verses 11–15. How many times does he say

“me” or “I” here? *A ton*. He is entirely focused on himself. Just like the people.

Now, Moses was wrong to complain and be selfish, but he was right to take his requests before God. He was right to ask for God’s help. Except.... when we get to verse 21, his selfishness grows to disbelief. He is so focused on his own anxieties he does not believe that God can feed the hundreds of thousands of Israelites. He says, “The people among whom I am number six hundred thousand on foot” —*like God doesn’t know how many Israelites there are*— “and you have said, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat a whole month!’” —*like God doesn’t remember what he promised*. “Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, and be enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, and be enough for them?”

*Seriously, Moses? Are you kidding me?*

Moses is the one who took handfuls of soot from the kiln and threw it in front of Pharaoh and saw it become boils breaking out on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt. Moses is the one who stretched out his staff toward heaven and saw God send thunder, hail, and fire down to the earth. Moses is the one who stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt and saw God bring a wind with locusts that covered the face of land so that nothing green remained in all of Egypt. Moses is the one who stretched out his hand toward heaven and saw God bring a felt darkness over Egypt for three days. Moses was the one who stretched out his hand over the Red Sea and saw the Lord drive back the waters so the Israelites could cross on dry land. Moses was the one who stretched out his hand over the sea and watched the water come back upon the Egyptians chasing them. Moses is the one who threw a log in the bitter water at Marah and saw it become sweet. Moses was the one who saw God provide bread from heaven to feed the Israelites after they crossed the sea. Moses is the one

who struck a rock in the desert and saw water come out of it. Moses was the one who witnessed lightning and thunder and trumpets and smoke shaking the mountain of Sinai.

*Is he really questioning if God can feed the Israelites?*

I think Moses is overwhelmed here. And in his anxiety, he says things to God that he does not really mean. (Is that relatable, or what?) Part of the problem is that everyone around him is complaining. *Literally*, he was surrounded by it. What started with the rabble quickly spread throughout the clans. The urge to complain and demand more was irresistible. It even got to Moses. That does not make it acceptable, but it does make it relatable. And that makes it very relevant to us today.

*Are you able to resist discontentment and disbelief when it comes sweeping through your life like wildfire? Do you find yourself looking at the hopelessness of the situation, or at the power and provision of God?*

If this great prophet of our faith struggled to focus on God's power, how much more will we struggle to focus on him? But look at how God responds to Moses' disbelief: *Is the LORD's hand shortened? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not.*

Two short sentences. No reproach, though he would have deserved it. Just a gracious God reaffirming that he can do anything. And so he does. Not only does he respond to Moses' need for other leadership, but he responds to the people's request for meat. But as we know, one request is righteous, while the other is not.

Notice how Moses responds. Even though he complained and disbelieved earlier, he now obeys the Lord's orders perfectly. He

gathers the 70 elders around the tent of meeting, which, of course, is the holy dwelling place of God. After Moses obeys, the Lord descends in the cloud and puts his Spirit upon every elder. And what happens? The elders start prophesying, and it is most certainly a sign of the blessing of God's Spirit (as we see elsewhere, like in 1 Sam 10:6–13, 19:20–24, and Joel 2:28).

#### QUAIL AND PLAGUE

What is interesting in Hebrew is that the word for spirit is the same word for wind—*ruach*. It is the *ruach* that rests upon the elders around the holy tent, and it is the *ruach* that brought the quail to the greedy Israelites around the outskirts of the camp. What this should teach us is that the Lord brings both blessing and curse. Like we mentioned earlier, this chapter represents a distinct shift from the first nine chapters in Numbers. In the beginning, all we see is obedience and the resulting blessing from God. He is communicative, gracious, faithful, holy, present. But while all of these characteristics are true of God, they represent an incomplete picture. And at the end of chapter 11, we see a fuller picture. God does not put up with sin. In the simplest terms, that is what it means for him to be holy.

And for the Israelites to be his people, they must be holy too. But this “rabble” with “the craving” was not holy. They were diseased with sin. In fact, the word used to describe their craving in verse 34 is the same word that is used in Deuteronomy 5:21: “And you shall not *desire* your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.” They desired what they did not have, and they dishonored the Lord. Ultimately, they died for it. It was their lust that killed them.

## A P P L Y

Today we read about the first rebellion of the Israelites after they left Sinai. Not only do the people complain, but Moses folds under the pressure, too. And we should ask ourselves: *Are you able to resist discontentment and disbelief when it comes sweeping through your life like wildfire? Do you find yourself looking at the hopelessness of the situation, or at the power and provision of God?*

1. If you are honest with yourself (and take your time here), what do you complain about the most?
  
2. Do you see your complaining as meaningless words or as rebellion against God?

3. How do you think God views your complaining?

## C L O S E

Just as the craving and grumbling spread among the Israelites, so, too, can our words ignite fires of discontentment among those around us. Are you the kind of person who spreads discontentment? Or are you the kind of person who spreads joyful praises about God?

It is not just our words that need changing; it is the heart from which the words flow. Close today by asking God to change your heart. Pray that he would develop in you a heart that is grateful for his blessings, and a mouth that overflows with his praises. Then take a moment to jot down a couple notes about today's reading.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

Biblical truth to meditate on:

WEEK 2 MEMORY VERSE  
The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).



# DAY 2

*numbers 12*

## P R E P A R E

Take a moment to turn your thoughts to Christ before you get started. Pray through this prayer from the great fifth-century theologian, St. Augustine.

*O God, the light of the hearts that see you, the life of the souls that love you, the strength of the minds that seek you; from whom to turn is to fall, to whom to turn is to rise and in whom to abide is to stand fast forever: grant us your blessing as we offer up our confessions and supplications, and though we are unworthy to approach you or to ask anything of you at all, hear and forgive us, for the sake of our great High Priest and only Mediator, Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.<sup>7</sup>*

Augustine

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 12.

1. Let's take a minute to be clear on a few basic details here. What was Aaron's role in Israel?
  
2. Why did Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses?

3. What was their actual complaint about?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Why was Miriam the only one to become leprous, and not Aaron too?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. How is Moses characterized throughout this passage, both in how he is described and what he does?

## THE COMPLAINT

What an interesting section we have here. In many ways, it mirrors the previous chapter with a series of complaint, divine punishment, and Moses praying to God. And just like the people's complaint for better food, Miriam and Aaron's complaint is also self-centered in nature. Though they claim to speak out because of Moses' wife, they never even mention her! The only information we get about her is in verse 1 when she is described as a Cushite. Now, the only wife of Moses that we know about is Zipporah, whom he met after he fled from Egypt to Midian (Ex 2:16–22). It is possible that Cushite is another term for Midianite, as Habakkuk 3:7 seems to suggest. It is also possible that Zipporah died and Moses took a new Cushite wife recently, or that Moses simply took a Cushite wife in addition to Zipporah.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear that Miriam and Aaron do not actually care about the wife. The only thing they care about is having as much authority and respect as Moses does. Look at their complaint: "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?"

The jealousy is evident. And it is more than just sibling rivalry. Aaron, as the high priest, was the highest religious leader in Israel. Miriam, their sister, was a prophetess and presumably the leader of the spirit-filled women (Ex. 15:20). So the heads of the priests and prophetesses have now joined forces to challenge Moses' role as intermediary between God and his people. This was more than an ordinary complaint; this was the heads of leadership turning on Moses.

And notice what immediately follows their complaint. Out of the blue, in the middle of the storyline, we are given some background information about Moses. *Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.* Why interrupt the story with this little detail? Because it shows that

Miriam and Aaron's complaint was unfounded! It contrasts their pride with Moses' humility. In fact, meek is an appropriate term, but *humble* is perhaps even better. The word conveys the sense of someone who is pious, who bows himself before God. Just think about what Moses said when the Lord first called him to his position: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11). He is certainly not perfect, as we have seen, but he is indeed the most humble, pious man in all the earth.

And how does the Lord respond to their complaint? He calls the three siblings to come out to the tent of meeting. The wording to "come out" suggests that the three of them were inside the first circle of encampment, where the priests and Levites dwelled, and the Lord called them to the entrance of the tent, which we have seen is a meeting place for communication between God and the Israelites.<sup>8</sup> When they come out, the Lord addresses the complaint. What he makes clear is that the grievance is ultimately against him, not Moses. Moses did nothing to seek out this position—in fact, he often scorns it! It is *the Lord* who chose Moses and decided to speak to him mouth to mouth. If they are to speak out against anyone, it should be the Lord. And they should be more than afraid—*absolutely terrified*—to ever speak out against the Lord.

And as quick as he came, the Lord's anger was kindled and he departed. *What a truly frightening experience.*

#### THE PUNISHMENT

When the cloud lifted, the three must have been stunned. Curiously, Aaron is not leprous like Miriam. Is this just an example of misogyny in the Bible? Well, not quite. The fact that Miriam is so often included in Israelite leadership clearly shows the value and honor placed on women—something unique to the Bible, in both ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman times.

So how should we understand Miriam becoming leprous while Aaron does not? The answer is found back in verse 1. And unfortunately, it is not something we can see in English. If you have ever learned another language, you might be familiar with the fact that some languages have specific feminine and masculine forms for verbs. Hebrew is one of those languages. And the verb for “speak out” in verse 1 is in the singular feminine form. Now, I know I lost some of you when I mentioned verbs, but this is pretty straightforward. Verse 1 literally says, “*And Miriam spoke out, and Aaron, against Moses.*” So while both of them were guilty, the emphasis is placed on Miriam. She is the initiator here. It has also been suggested that Aaron was spared from leprosy because his role as high priest was vital to the wellbeing of the people. Whether or not that was the case, it does not change the fact that the text points to Miriam as the ringleader.

Aaron’s reaction of shock and remorse shows that he felt equally guilty, and that he recognized he was spared from rightful punishment. As one theologian points out,

The disfigurement, therefore, of his sister, alarmed and terrified Aaron, so that, examining his own condition, he acknowledged himself to be deserving of a similar judgment. His humble prayer manifests that those high aspirations were subdued, which had carried him away into unholy jealousy. Moses, who was younger than himself, and whose superiority he just before could not endure, he now calls his *lord*, and confesses himself to be subject to his authority and power.<sup>9</sup>

As Aaron begs Moses for mercy, he knows that it is still possible for him to contract the disease or for Miriam’s disease to get even worse. He does not make excuses or downplay their actions; he acknowledges that they acted foolishly and implores Moses for grace.

And what does Moses do? He does what he does best. He cries out to the Lord! *If only our lives were characterized by such swift and heartfelt prayer to God.* His words are few, but they are humble and effective. And the Lord responds immediately. Though it is not explicit in the text, God has evidently healed Miriam. We know this because she was only required to spend seven days outside camp, which was the standard purification period for a leper who had been cured. If she had not been healed yet, she would have been required to remain outside camp indefinitely.

Though cured, Miriam must face the consequences. She was shut outside the camp for seven days. And not just that, but *the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again.* Can you imagine what that must have felt like? To be the only reason why over 600,000 people must remain camped for another week?

Talk about an embarrassing moment.

## A P P L Y

I've had a few of those myself. When Randy was a youth pastor in Fountain Hills, our church had a preschool. Tuition alone did not even come close to keeping it afloat, and the church spent thousands of dollars on it every year (not to mention having regular fundraisers). And it was always strange to me that the church sunk so much money into the preschool when our town was mostly retirees, and it didn't seem to bring any new families to the church.

One day after service, we were talking about needing money for something. Probably camp scholarships for youth group. Anyway, I made a joke about how we could just stop spending so much money on the preschool. Well, someone heard it. Who told our senior pastor. Who told Randy. Who told me. And thankfully it was a very mild reprimand (if you can even call it that). Sort of a, "Hey,

*don't disparage the preschool, ok?"* kind of thing. But still, it was mortifying. And that was with only a few people knowing about it!

Now, we have all said sinful things about other people. But can you imagine if the Lord himself came down on a cloud to reprimand you, and the entire nation found out about it—*or perhaps even saw and heard it themselves*—and then had to wait for your punishment to be over before they could set out again? That would be *excruciating*.

I can't imagine the shame that Miriam must have felt.

But at the same time, I kind of envy her. Do you think she ever spoke out against someone again? *I would guess not*. But how often do we repeat the same sins over and over again because we have not truly felt the weight of our sin? There is a real blessing in being disciplined. There is a blessing in drawing near to God on your knees. There is a blessing in feeling the weight of your sin and seeking forgiveness for it.

1. Is there anything you have said in private that you need to confess and ask forgiveness for today?

It's so easy for us to talk about other people behind their back. Sometimes we know we are in the wrong. Other times we tell ourselves it's ok because we are "worried" about them—or even worse, we use a "prayer request" as an excuse to talk about them.

I have a friend who has really encouraged me in this area. She just does not say anything bad about other people. Period. It's as simple as that. If it does not build up other people, she does not say it. I know some of us are thinking, *well... good for her*. But this is what all believers are called to! You and me both. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear."

Miriam's story should remind us only to say things that are *good for building up*. She spoke out against the humblest man on earth, and the Lord himself reprimanded her for it. Granted, our victims are not that righteous... but that does not matter. There is never a situation in which we are justified for gossiping about someone because they "deserved" it.

*If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless* (James 1:26).

Do not talk about other people. Unless you are singing their praises, don't talk about them. Simple as that.

2. If this is something you struggle with, how can you prepare yourself to not talk about other people?



3. What verse have you memorized to help yourself when you are tempted to gossip?

4. What kind phrases can you use to redirect conversations verging on gossip?

This story about Miriam should be a stern reminder for us that everything we say is said in the presence of the Lord. But far more importantly than that, it should show us the seriousness of sin and point us to Christ.

*Do you see what the Lord does here?* He exposes and punishes sin. But he also pardons sin. That is what God does. He exposes, punishes, and pardons sin.

We have to recognize the seriousness of sin. You can pretend all you want that nothing has happened, but your guilt is still there, and your punishment is still due. We cannot have a relationship with God while ignoring the sin in our life. First John 1:6 says, “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” God never looks the other way. He demands justice. He demands payment for sin.

And fortunately for us, Christ has provided the payment for sin. Christ has paid the penalty for us. First Peter 2:24 says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

*Have you experienced that healing?*

If you have never asked forgiveness from God and been reconciled to him, now is the time. Cry out to God. Ask forgiveness. Tell him what is on your heart. You can be sure that he hears and forgives you.

He exposes and punishes, but he also pardons it.

5. For those who have been reconciled to God, *is there any sin in your life that you need to expose?*

6. Do you instinctively run to God with every need? Is your life characterized by constant communication with him, like Moses?

## C L O S E

Finish today by taking a moment to remember what you read, but then pray that God would work a profound and abiding repentance in you, that you may see more clearly the brightness and glories of the saving cross.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on:**

ETERNAL FATHER,  
Thou art good beyond all thought,  
    But I am vile, wretched, miserable, blind;  
My lips are ready to confess,  
    but my heart is slow to feel,  
    and my ways reluctant to amend.  
I bring my soul to thee;  
    break it, wound it, bend it, mould it.  
Unmask to me sin's deformity,  
    that I may hate it, abhor it, flee from it.  
My faculties have been a weapon of revolt  
    against thee;  
    as a rebel I have misused my strength,  
    and served the foul adversary of thy kingdom.  
Give me grace to bewail my insensate folly,  
Grant me to know that the way of transgressors

is hard,  
that evil paths are wretched paths,  
that to depart from thee is to lose all good.  
I have seen the purity and beauty of thy perfect law,  
the happiness of those in whose heart it reigns,  
the calm dignity of the walk to which it calls,  
yet I daily violate and contemn its precepts.  
Thy loving Spirit strives within me,  
brings me Scripture warnings,  
speaks in startling providences,  
allures by secret whispers,  
yet I choose devices and desires to my own hurt,  
impiously resent, grieve,  
and provoke him to abandon me.

All these sins I mourn, lament, and for them  
cry pardon.  
Work in me more profound and abiding repentance;  
Give me the fullness of a godly grief  
that trembles and fears,  
yet ever trusts and loves,  
which is ever powerful, and ever confident;  
Grant that through the tears of repentance  
I may see more clearly the brightness  
and glories of the saving cross.<sup>10</sup>

WEEK 2 MEMORY VERSE  
The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).

# DAY 3

## *numbers 13–20*

### P R E P A R E

*O you who are everywhere present, filling yet transcending all things; ever acting, ever at rest; you who teach the hearts of the faithful without noise of words: teach us, we pray you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*<sup>11</sup>

Augustine

### R E A D

When we read the Bible, it is important to read through entire books at a time. Knowing the big picture helps us to understand the little details. Otherwise, we get an incomplete picture, and we can pull things out of context.

At this point you may be asking yourself, *so why haven't we read all the way through Numbers yet?* Yes... Excellent question. We spent the first week introducing the study and the book of Numbers before examining the first ten chapters. Now that we have a grip on things, we will spend the next few days reading through the rest of the book of Numbers. We will examine the chapters in detail over the next few weeks, but for now, it will be helpful for us to simply read and reflect on them. As we go forward, knowing the full story of Numbers will help us understand the smaller sections.

- > Today, read Numbers 13–20. This will take a while, so we will keep the rest of the day short.

## A P P L Y

1. What part of the reading impacted you the most today? Why?
2. What does that passage teach you about God? How will you meditate on that truth throughout the day?

## C L O S E

Close today by thanking God for his word. Pray that he would continue to develop in you a deep love and reverence for it.

What biblical truth will you meditate on today?

### WEEK 2 MEMORY VERSE

The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).



# DAY 4

*numbers 21-27*

## P R E P A R E

*Open our hearts, O Lord, and enlighten us by the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may seek what is well-pleasing to your will; and so order our doings after your commandments that we may be found meet to enter into your unending joys; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>12</sup>*

Bede

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 21–27.

## A P P L Y

1. What did God teach you in his word today?

2. What biblical truth will you meditate on for the rest of the day?

3. How can you share what you read today with someone else who may need to hear it?

## C L O S E

Close today in prayer, as always.

*Let us, therefore, not cling to fleeting things, which slip away and depart, but to those which are enduring and immovable. May we all attain them through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom and with whom be glory to the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always, for ever and ever.<sup>13</sup>*

Chrysostom

## WEEK 2 MEMORY VERSE

The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).

# DAY 5

*numbers 28-36*

## P R E P A R E

*For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.*

Psalm 33:4

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 28–36.

## A P P L Y

1. What do these chapters teach us about God?

2. How will you meditate on those truths today?

3. How can you share what you read today with someone else who may need to hear it?

## C L O S E

Finish today by praying through Clement's words below.

*Through your works, you have manifested the eternal ordering of the world, Lord, creator of the universe. You remain the same throughout all generations; just in your judgments, admirable in power and magnificence, full of wisdom in creating and prudent in strengthening everything in existence. You manifest your goodness toward all visible things and your fidelity toward those who trust you, for you are merciful and compassionate. Amen.<sup>14</sup>*

Clement of Rome

## WEEK 2 MEMORY VERSE

The LORD is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).

WEEK 3  
*numbers 13-15*

## MEMORY VERSES

HEBREWS 3:12–13

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.



# DAY 1

*numbers 13*

## P R E P A R E

Before you hop in today, turn your heart to God. Ask him to teach you through his word, and to open your eyes to see his faithfulness.

*I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.*

Psalm 77:11

## R E A D

- > Let's start by reading Numbers 13:1–24.
  
- > After you read it, take a look at the map on page 332 and notice the places mentioned in verses 21–22.

1. Why do you think the Lord uses a man from every tribe?

2. What does Moses want the spies to find out about Canaan (vv. 17–20)?

3. What do we learn about Canaan in verses 22–23?

4. Why do you think the Lord commands them to spy on the land in the first place?

## SPYING OUT THE LAND

Let's go over a few basic details here to make sure we understand the passage. The Lord commands Moses to send spies, one chief from each tribe, into the land of Canaan. The chiefs listed here are different from those listed in the census and the tabernacle dedication, but perhaps the most senior leaders were listed there whereas younger leaders were sent on this journey. In verse 8, we see that the spy from the tribe of Nun is Hoshea, which means (God) "saves," but later in verse 16, we learn that this is Joshua's original name. At some point, whether here or later, Moses changes it to Joshua, which means "the Lord saves." We also know that the Israelites set out from Sinai in the early spring (10:11–12) and now it is late summer or early fall ("the season of the first ripe grapes"), so we are a few months into their journey. Lastly, the city of Hebron is mentioned twice in verse 22. Why is Hebron so important? Good question. Hebron is where Abraham camped and built an altar to the Lord after he promised to give him the land and make his descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen 13:14–18). It is where Sarah and Isaac were buried (Gen 23:2, 35:27). It is where David lived and where many of his sons were born (2 Sam 3:5). Hebron has a long and significant history with the Israelites, and it is no coincidence that the spies mention it.

Now that we have covered these background details, let's talk about the significance of this section. The first 16 verses should tell us something about God. Look at his words again: *Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, every one a chief among them.* There are two things that should strike us about the Lord's message. The first is that he is giving the promised land, and the second is that he is giving it to the people of Israel. Land. Nation. *Does this ring any bells?* The Lord promised Jacob (*Israel*) in Genesis 35 that his descendants would become a great nation and that he would give them the land that he was lying on. God promised him land and a nation. And here, he is

reminding them of that promise. The very fact that a man was sent from every tribe reinforces the fact that Israel was already a great nation—not to mention the sense of unity it instills among the tribes. God had fulfilled part of his promise, and now he is about to fulfill the rest.

But there is still one lingering question which we must answer about this reconnaissance. *Why does the Lord want them to spy out the land in the first place?* Clearly the Lord already knows all about the land. He knows every hair on every head that resides there. He knows every tiny seed, every piece of fruit, every massive tree. He created every person and every square inch of the land of Canaan. He is not sending them on this mission for himself; he is sending them on this mission for *themselves*. It is both a taste of what is to come (good and bad) and a test of their trust in the Lord. It should be an opportunity for them to see the great fruitfulness of the land and to yearn for the fulfillment of God's promised blessings—if only they would trust in the Lord.

And look at what Moses wants them to find out. While he lists several things, it really comes down to two main points: what the people are like and what the land is like. Both of these are answered in verses 22 and 23. There are three different groups of people living in the land, and while we do not get any descriptions of them here, we know that three nations against one seems a bit daunting. The land, however, is a different story. A single cluster of grapes so big that it must be carried on the shoulders of two men? Yeah, it is definitely fruitful.

Notice how straightforward this report is. The author lays out the facts without embellishment or opinion—which is quite different from how the spies will relay the information in the next section. Let's turn there now.

## THE RETURN OF THE SPIES

> Finish the chapter by reading Numbers 13:25–33.

5. The land is often qualified by a relative phrase (“*which...*”). How do the spies describe the land in verses 27 and 32? How is the land described differently in 13:2, 14:6, 14:23, 14:30, and 14:40?

The author strategically gives us the unbiased information about Canaan in verses 22–24, which leaves us astonished by the panicked report of the spies in these verses. I mean, these were men that saw God bring the ten plagues upon Egypt. They witnessed him part the Red Sea so they could walk across on dry ground. They followed the cloud through the desert by day and by night. They ate the manna he miraculously provided out of nothing. *Do they really doubt that God can give them victory over this land and these people?*

Interestingly, the phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey” has always been joined with the promise that God would give the land and its inhabitants to his people (Ex 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:24)—*until now*. The spies specifically leave out the promise, and in doing so, openly reject the possibility of overtaking it. They mention briefly that the land is indeed flowing with milk and honey, but they do not even care about that! They spend the rest of the time complaining about how enormous and invincible the people were.

They were *terrified*. They magnified the problem, and they entirely disregarded the power of their God. Though two men stood before them shouldering proof of the land's prosperity, they saw nothing but certain defeat.

## A P P L Y

It is easy to look down on the Israelites and think of how faithless and fearful and shortsighted they were. *But isn't that the exact same thing we do? Over and over again?*

We forget about all the ways that God has worked miracles in the past. We forget about all the ways he has shown up and protected us and provided for us at just the right time. We forget about the truths we read in Scripture—about his faithfulness and his power and his perfect provision. We are so quick to take our focus off of these truths and throw ourselves entirely into the problem. Our heart starts racing and our eyes grow big and we sweat from sheer anxiety. We probably act more like the Israelites than we care to admit.

1. What “impossible” problems are in your life right now?

2. Have you gone to God yet to ask for his help and provision in these problems? If you have not, now is the time. Pour out your heart to God. Feel free to write out your prayer in the space below. Don't worry about finishing today's reading or how much time it will take. Just talk to God and ask him to work powerfully in these difficult areas.

The Israelites' problem was that they forgot the mighty acts of the Lord. This is why he constantly commands them to *remember*! In fact, when he gives them the ten commandments and commands them to keep the Sabbath, he says, "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (Deut 5:15). Today, we are no different. We are just as forgetful as they were, and we *must* remind ourselves of God's might.

3. In what ways can you actively remind yourself of God's power and faithfulness? (Think... past examples of his faithfulness, memory verses, songs and hymns, etc.)



4. Think back on your life. How has God worked in the last month? In the last year? In the last few years? Be as specific as you can. Write down all the ways you can think of where he has guided you and provided for you and answered your prayer.

*I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.*

Psalm 77:11

## C L O S E

- > Finish your devotional time today by recalling what you read and why it matters.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

- > Before you head back to the busyness of life, pray through this old Puritan prayer, and be encouraged by the faithful example of believers who have gone before us.

*O LORD OF GRACE,*

*The world is before me this day,  
and I am weak and fearful,  
but I look to thee for strength;  
If I venture forth alone I stumble and fall,  
but on the Beloved's arms I am firm  
as the eternal hills;  
If left to the treachery of my heart  
I shall shame thy Name,  
but if enlightened, guided, upheld by thy Spirit,*

*I shall bring thee glory.  
Be thou my arm to support,  
my strength to stand,  
my light to see,  
my feet to run,  
my shield to protect,  
my sword to repel,  
my sun to warm.*

*To enrich me will not diminish thy fullness;  
All thy lovingkindness is in thy Son,  
I bring him to thee in the arms of faith,  
I urge his saving Name as the One who died for me.  
I plead his blood to pay my debts of wrong.  
Accept his worthiness for my unworthiness,  
his sinlessness for my transgressions,  
his purity for my uncleanness,  
his sincerity for my guile,  
his truth for my deceits,  
his meekness for my pride,  
his constancy for my backslidings,  
his love for my enmity,  
his fullness for my emptiness,  
his faithfulness for my treachery,  
his obedience for my lawlessness,  
his glory for my shame,  
his devotedness for my waywardness,  
his holy life for my unchaste ways,  
his righteousness for my dead works,  
his death for my life.<sup>15</sup>*

#### WEEK 3 MEMORY VERSES

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12–13).

# DAY 2

*numbers 14:1–10*

## P R E P A R E

Start today by praying that God would protect you from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Ask him to soften your heart toward him, and to listen to his voice in all that you do.

*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,*

*“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.  
Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.’  
As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”*

*Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil,  
unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.  
But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called  
“today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness  
of sin.*

Hebrews 3:7–14



## THE ISRAELITES COMPLAIN

Remember the last time the Israelites complained? In 11:4–6, the people wept and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” They have progressed from wishing they had meat and fish to wishing they were *dead*. Talk about a spiral.

And in their spiral, the Israelites are perfectly united. *Three times* they are described in unison: *all the congregation, all the people, the whole congregation*. Together they complain. Together they rebel. Together they are guilty in their sin.

And what is their solution to their problem? Pick a new leader and go back to Egypt! That seems perfectly reasonable. I mean, after all, they had only been oppressed by the Egyptians as slaves. And when they left, the Egyptians lost virtually all of their national labor, no doubt crushing their economy. And then tons of the Egyptian soldiers and horses and chariots were drowned in the Red Sea when the Lord released the waters again.

But I’m sure the Egyptians have forgotten about that by now.

*Are you kidding me?* The Israelites would have faced certain wrath and vengeance from the Egyptians. But they would rather face death from them than follow their God to the promised land.

## THE RIGHTEOUS RESPONSE

But thankfully, there are a few—*though literally only a few*—who do not rebel against God. Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before the assembly, which at first, I thought was strange. When I think of someone falling on their face, I think of the Lord or angels appearing before them. I think of people worshipping God in awe. I certainly do not think of righteous leaders falling down before sinful and rebellious people. So what did they mean by it?

It is possible that they fell down in prayer to God. It is also possible that they fell down to express their disbelief and indignation before the people. What I think is most likely, however, is that they fell down in fear of what God was about to do to these wicked people. But God’s glory does not immediately appear, and the people are given one more chance to repent. Caleb already told the people that they could certainly overcome the Canaanites (13:30), but now he and Joshua go to the furthest extreme they can. They tear their clothes and plead with the people not to rebel. They remind them of God’s promises and his power to give them victory. Look at how closely their message mirrors the words of the spies in chapter 13:

<u>The Spies</u>	<u>Caleb and Joshua</u>
<i>the land to which you sent us</i> (27)	<i>the land which we passed through</i> (7)
<i>flows with milk and honey</i> (27)	<i>flows with milk and honey</i> (8)
<i>however</i> [the people are strong] (28)	<i>only</i> [do not rebel] (9)
<i>devours its inhabitants</i> (32)	<i>they are bread for us</i> (9)

Caleb and Joshua do not deny any of the facts that the spies reported. In fact, they confirm them. What they deny is the hopelessness and fear that plagued the other spies. Where the other spies concluded that the Israelites would be devoured, Caleb and Joshua concluded that the Israelites would devour the Canaanites. Those two had no doubt whatsoever that the Lord was with them and that the Lord would give them the land—if only the Israelites were only willing to obey.

And how do the people respond? The entire congregation said to stone them. Once again, we should be asking ourselves, *Are you kidding me?* Moses and Aaron have fallen on their faces. God gives the people one more chance to repent. So Caleb and Joshua tear their clothes and tell the Israelites, once again, that they are more

than able to overcome the Canaanites. It is only a matter of trust and obedience. *And they still don't listen.* They chose to listen to their fears over the promises of the Lord. They chose to listen to the fearmongers instead of the faithful.

This should be an eyeopener to us about the reality of our sinful human nature. Sin blinds us to the truth. Though Joshua and Caleb reminded them of the promises of the Lord, the people only went further into their sin.

Christians often wonder why people do this. They wonder why people continue to do something even when they know it is wrong or harmful. They wonder how people can wake up every day and never question how they came into existence or what the purpose of life is. They wonder how they have heard the truth about Christ and yet did not accept it.

But when these thoughts cross our minds, it shows us that *we do not have accurate understanding of the seriousness of sin.* If we fully recognize the depravity of our sinful nature, we understand that sin is spiritually blinding. It prevents us from clearly seeing and understanding the truth. It keeps us from listening to the voice of reason.

## A P P L Y

A while back, I got a call from a friend going through a hard time. She said, "I know I'm being overly emotional here, but I just can't help it. I don't know why I'm so reactive all the time." I think we have all experienced moments like that. Moments when our emotions take control of us. Moments when our fear is overwhelming. Moments when we see nothing but hopelessness.

And you know what? The problem is that we are looking at the wrong problem. We think our problem lies in our relationships or our marriage or our job or whatever else is afflicting us. But the



real problem usually lies in *our relationship with God*. We focus on everything else except for him. We listen to every voice except for *his*—just like the Israelites did.

You know what my first question to my friend was? *Have you read your Bible today?*

It is so easy to be swept away in our anxiety and forget to turn to God. We focus on our problems instead of on the ways that God has faithfully provided in the past. We view our situations as hopeless and we lose ourselves in despair. We listen to fear over truth—just like the Israelites listened to the terrified spies. *That is why it is so important for us to constantly be reading the truth in God's word!* We must actively remind ourselves of his promises. We must replace our fear and anxiety with the hope and truth in Scripture. We must ask ourselves, *whose voice am I going to listen to? Those who cause me to fear? Or the One who takes away fear?*

1. What voices do you normally turn to for comfort and advice during hard times?

2. How can you better develop your instinct to turn to God, and to listen to him and his word first?

3. How can you preach God's truth to yourself? Have you been diligent in memorizing your verses?

## C L O S E

If we have not trained ourselves to listen to God in the good times, it is all the more difficult to listen to him in the wilderness. But when we train ourselves to read God's word every day, to memorize it and meditate on it, we build a foundation that is not easily shaken in the storms. We tune our ears to hear the voice of our Lord over the lies of this world.

- > Pray that God would help you turn to him first in every situation.
- > Pray that he would help you reject the voices of the world and trust in his promises.
- > Pray that he would help you be disciplined in your Bible reading and memorization.

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

John 10:27–28

Before you go, take just a moment to jot down some notes about our reading. Be sure to review this week's memory verses, too.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

### WEEK 3 MEMORY VERSES

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12–13).

# DAY 3

*numbers 14:11–25*

## P R E P A R E

As always, begin today by praying that God would give you wisdom to understand his word, and that he would give you a clear, focused mind. Pray, also, that he would open your eyes to see the power of your prayer and the many ways in which he answers you.

*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

James 5:16

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 14:11–25.

1. What is it specifically that the people are guilty of in verse 11?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Why does the Lord decide to pardon the people?

3. Look carefully at Moses' prayer. What can we imitate? In what ways does it teach us how to pray today?

#### THE PRAYER OF MOSES

Moses begins his prayer by arguing that if the Lord strikes down the people, the pagan nations will hear it and mock him. This made me uncomfortable at first. Maybe you felt that way too. It almost sounds as if the Lord had not thought of this—like he lashed out an empty threat without considering the consequences. (Or maybe I am just reading too much of my own bias into the text as a mom. Not that I would ever make empty threats to my kids without

thinking first.) But we know that God is omniscient. He knows all things, whether real or hypothetical (Ps 139:4, 147:5; 1 Jn 3:20). He knows exactly how the pagan nations will react if he strikes down the Israelites, and he did not make that statement rashly. What Moses means by his statement can be found in verse 16. If the Lord strikes down the Israelites, the pagans will say, "It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land that he swore to give to them that he has killed them in the wilderness." This is what Moses is most concerned about. He does not want other people to dishonor the Lord. What he wants is the Lord to be rightly shown as the great and powerful God he is (v. 17). And while the Lord is still great and powerful no matter what he decides, the question is whether or not the other nations will see him as such.

And then Moses says something that should stop us in our tracks. *Moses quotes the Lord's words back to him.* He does not do it with any spite or disrespect; he simply uses it as the basis for his request. Look at what he does. He makes a request in verse 17 ("please let the power of the Lord be great") and grounds it in God's word ("as you have promised"). Then he quotes God's words directly in verse 18, and he makes another request in verse 19 ("please pardon the iniquity of this people") and grounds it again in God's word ("according to the greatness of your steadfast love").

That should teach us a great deal about how we should pray today. *Our prayers should always be informed by the truths we find in Scripture.* In fact, there is nothing more effective "in our prayers than to set His own word before God, and then to found our supplications upon His promises, as if He dictated to us out of His own mouth what we were to ask."<sup>16</sup> And if we base our prayers on Scripture, knowing there is nothing more sure than the word of God himself, then "there is no reason to fear that they will be ineffectual, or that their results should disappoint us, since He who has spoken will prove Himself to be true."<sup>17</sup>

4. Do you ever use Scripture in your prayers as the basis for your requests? How can you start doing that more?

Another lesson we should take from this passage is the fact that Moses has faith to ask great things from God. The fact that God just said he will strike down the entire nation does not deter Moses from pleading with him—and Moses' pleading honored God. It gives God glory when we humbly present our requests before him according to his word.

This is a truth that we see repeated all over the New Testament. Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Mt 7:7–8). He also says, "And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith" (Mt 21:22). Similarly, John says, "And whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him" (1 Jn 3:22). He also goes on to say, "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever" (1 Jn 5:14–15).



*Are we starting to get the point yet?*

God desires us to ask great things of him, and he delights to answer those prayers.

That means our prayer has great significance. *Just look at Moses!* His prayer, quite literally, just saved the lives of an entire nation. Simply because he asked God.

*Do you have that kind of faith?*

*What great things are you asking God to do in your life and the lives of those around you?*

God desires us to ask great things of him, and he delights to answer those prayers. It's time for us to pray like we believe that.

#### THE LORD RESPONDS

Then the Lord responds to Moses' prayer. *Do you ever wish that God would audibly answer your prayer? Do you ever wonder what he would say?* Here we have the very words of God as he responds to Moses! How incredible is that?!

And his words teach us a lot. Let's pull out a few truths from these verses.

#### 1. *The Lord answers prayer.*

The most obvious and important thing we should learn from the Lord's response is that *the Lord answers prayer*. (Duh.) Look at the very first thing the Lord says in response to Moses: *I have pardoned, according to your word*. God answers Moses' prayer. It is not just that he *heard* Moses, but he does exactly what Moses asked! This should astonish us! God said he would destroy the nation of Israel and start over again, but because Moses

interceded and asked for his mercy, the Lord forgave the people and did not destroy them.

*If you ever doubt for a moment that your prayer matters, just look at this passage.* It doesn't matter that Moses was one of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament; it doesn't matter that this happened thousand of years ago under a different covenant. The same God who heard Moses' prayer all those years ago continues to hear your prayers today. God allows you—*and commands you*—to pray to him and ask him to work powerfully in your life and the lives of those around you. Through your prayer, God heals marriages. Through your prayer, God saves the unrighteous. Through your prayer, God miraculously provides. *Your prayer has great power.*

*The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

James 5:16

2. *God is unchanging in his character, but he responds differently to different situations.*

The second thing we should learn from this passage is that God never changes in his character, but he responds differently to different situations. In verse 12, the Lord says he will strike down the people, but after verse 20, we clearly see that he does not follow through on that. So does that mean that God changed his mind? Does that mean that he can change his mind whenever he wants? If that is the case, how can we ever trust him?

In just a few chapters, we have the answer to this question. Numbers 23:19 says, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" This verse shows us that not only does God never lie, but he always does what he says he will do. At the same time, like we see in our

current situation, we also recognize that God may “change” his mind as the situation changes. In other words, he responds differently to different situations. Let’s use our passage as an example.

	<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>
Situation:	Israel rebels	Israel rebels, but Moses pleads for God's mercy
Consequence:	Israel will be struck down	Israel will live, but those who saw his signs will not see the promised land

The situation before Moses prayed was different than the situation after Moses prayed. And God responded differently to those two different situations. Wayne Grudem describes it like this: “*God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.*”<sup>18</sup> This is known as the *unchangeableness* of God. Sometimes, we also refer to it as his *immutability*.

### 3. *Forgiveness does not mean that consequences disappear.*

Sometimes people have the misconception that being forgiven means they are off the hook for any punishment, but this passage clearly disproves that. There may be times when God forgives us *and* he spares us from any consequences, but this does not happen every time. Sometimes we have to live with the just consequences of our sin. That is exactly what we see here with the Israelites. God spared their lives, but those who saw his glory and signs will not be able to enter the promised land. They will die in the desert as they suggested.

When Randy was a youth pastor in Fountain Hills, one of the students got pregnant at 14. Being forgiven by God did not mean

that the baby just disappeared. We would be wrong to think that forgiveness means we no longer have to deal with the consequences. But here's the thing—*our consequences are not what matter most in life*. What matters most is being forgiven by our all-consuming God. What matters most is restoring our relationship with him. *That* is what matters.

And besides, you never know how God will turn our consequences into some of our greatest blessings. Our student's "consequence" is named Gavin, and he just turned 8. He adores his step-dad, who is a youth pastor, and his sweet mama pours her heart and her soul into the girls of their youth group.

Forgiveness does not mean that consequences disappear—but *it is remarkable how often God uses our consequences to draw us near to him and bless us more than we could ever imagine*.

## A P P L Y

We covered *so much* in our passage today. From grounding our prayer in Scripture to seeing how he answers prayer, these verses have huge significance for our lives today. Let's think through how we might live differently because of what we read.

1. If you were honest with yourself, how often would you say you pray to God every day? What could you do to remind yourself or set aside time for yourself to pray more often throughout the day?

2. What seems most “impossible” to you? That God would restore the failing marriage of someone you know? That God would save people in your life who despise him? That you could ever truly be forgiven from past sins or healed from past trauma? What “impossible” things do you need to ask God to do in your life and the lives of those around you?

3. One final tidbit to ponder. Psalm 106:23 mentions our passage from today. It says:

*Therefore he said he would destroy them—  
had not Moses, his chosen one,  
stood in the breach before him,  
to turn away his wrath from destroying them.*

How does Moses' role here (in Numbers 14) foreshadow that of Christ?

## C L O S E

Well done today. We went over a lot, but I hope you are encouraged by all the hard work you have put in over the last few weeks. May God teach us and guide us through his word. May we cherish every moment we spend reading and reflecting on it.

Before you end today, jot down a few reminders about our passage today.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

Permit us not, O Lord, to hear your word in vain. Convince us of its truth, cause us to feel its power, and bind us to yourself with cords of faith and hope and love that never shall be broken. We bind to ourselves today, you our God: your power to hold us, your hand to guide us, your eye to watch us, your ear to hear us, your wisdom to teach us, your word to give us speech, your presence to defend us, this day and every day; in the name of the blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to whom be the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever and forever. Amen.<sup>19</sup>

*St. Patrick*

### WEEK 3 MEMORY VERSES

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12–13).



# DAY 4

*numbers 14:26-45*

## P R E P A R E

*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.*

Ephesians 2:4–5

Before you begin your devotion today, praise God for his mercy. Thank him for loving you even when you were dead in your trespasses. Ask him to give you wisdom to understand his word and to help you meditate on it throughout the day.

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 14:20–45.

1. What do the Israelites wish for in 14:2–3? What does God give them in verses 29 and 31?

2. What does God command the Israelites to do in verse 25?

3. And what do they actually do in verses 40 and 44?

#### THE LORDS' RESPONSE

Yesterday, we began talking about God's response to Moses' prayer. In verses 20–25, God forgives the people, states their punishment, and gives them instructions for what to do next. As for their punishment, none of those who saw his glory and signs, except for Caleb (and Joshua), will enter the promised land. Instead, they will turn around and head back through the wilderness toward the Red Sea. God intended them to conquer the promised land—to inherit a fruitful land, flowing with milk and honey—but because of their sin and rebellion, they will remain in the desert for the rest of their lives.

As for their instructions, they are to “set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea” (25). And, my, *what right irony there is here!* The Israelites complain that they want to go back to Egypt, a wish the Lord will not grant, but he does continue their journey to the promised land by turning around and heading back on the route through which they just escaped Egypt! And beyond that, when God tries to lead the Israelites from the Red Sea to the promised land, they will not go. But when God instructs them to

return and take the route to the Red Sea (like they suggested), they try to go into the promised land.

Seriously, Israelites?!

This really gives understanding to the Lord's words in verses 11 and 26. *How long will this people despise me?*

#### THE ISRAELITES' PUNISHMENT

As you probably noticed, the Lord's response in verse 26–35 mirrors the same information he gave in verses 20–25, only with greater detail. This is typical of Hebrew literature. We are often given a first account with the main points, then a second (or more) account with greater details. This repetition not only gives us further clarity through the additional details (given in cycles), but it also emphasizes the importance of the message for future generations.

So what additional details do we have in this second cycle of the Lord's response to Moses? It is not just that the Israelites who saw God's glory will not inherit the promised land, but now we learn that they will wander in the wilderness for forty years until all of them are dead. It is only their children who, after suffering forty years in the desert for the faithlessness of their parents, will inherit the promised land.

Certainly the punishment fits the crime, doesn't it? Well, not really, since the Israelites deserved to die for their sin. But instead of giving them their just punishment, God lets them live and gives them what they asked for in verse 2. They will die in the wilderness just as they proposed. But as for their children, that is a different story. They are worried that their children will "become a prey." In other words, they are fully convinced that God is powerless to protect their little ones against the Canaanites. But what does God promise to do for their *little prey*? He promises to *bring them in*.

What a beautiful image that is! The Lord protects his children. What the Israelites assumed would be lost, God promises to protect.

#### FURTHER REBELLION

When the Lord finishes speaking, we are given a few verses with new information. Now we are told what happened to the spies who did not believe the Lord and convinced the people to disbelieve him too. *They died by plague before the Lord*—all the spies except for Caleb and Joshua. Can you imagine what a sight that must have been for the Israelites? Moses gives the Israelites the message from the Lord detailing their punishment (vv. 28–34)—that they shall die in the wilderness, and when they are all dead, their children shall see the promised land. Then the Israelites see all the unfaithful spies die by plague before them! What a testament to the power of God and the faithfulness demanded by him! Surely the Israelites would obey the Lord now, right?

Wrong.

*If we ever think that people would turn to God if they only saw his power and might, we are wrong. Mankind is blinded by their sinful nature. It is only through the Holy Spirit opening our eyes to see that we may recognize the truth about God.*

It is just painful to see the Israelites disobey the Lord *again*. But disobey they do. When the Lord tells them to go into the promised land, they will not go. When the Lord tells them *not* to go into the promised land, they go.

Think about what is going through their mind at this point. The Lord just told them that they would wander the wilderness for forty years until they die, all because they would not go into the promised land when he said to. So what is their solution to this? They decide to finally obey the original command to enter the

promised land. After all, who would want to die wandering the desert when they could be thriving in a fruitful land? Surely God's warning that they will die in the wilderness is just an empty threat. They will finally obey the original command, inherit the promised land, and live happily ever after. Right?

Wrong.

The Israelites disbelieved *again!* This entire time they have disbelieved the Lord. What charge does God bring against them in verse 11? They did not believe him. And what did they do again here? They did not believe him. They did not believe his promise that they would die in the wilderness. They tried to "make it right" by going into the promised land like he originally wanted, but they are missing the point entirely. When God speaks, his word is true. *When are they finally going to understand that?* They cannot pretend that his promise of them dying in the wilderness is just an empty threat. If he says they will die in the wilderness, then they will die in the wilderness. It is time that they finally start believing him.

And you know what is so remarkable about the end of this chapter? The Lord forgives the Israelites, then they immediately disobey him. *Yes, I know you've put that much together by now,* but think about this for a minute. The Lord is omniscient; we talked about that yesterday. He knows all things. He knew that the Israelites would turn around and disobey him again as soon as he forgave them. *But he forgave them anyway.* Because he is a gracious God.

*Do you realize how significant that is?* God saved the lives of the Israelites—and more importantly, pardoned them—even though he knew they would rebel again.

Our God is a gracious God. Our God is a *patient* God.

If you ever start to feel crushed under the weight of the sin that remains in your life, if you wonder when you will ever make progress in those areas, if you question whether God still loves and cherishes you when you have failed again for the millionth time—*remember the Israelites*. Remember that God forgave them, knowing they would immediately disobey them again.

And the same is true for you. God forgave you knowing that you would continue to sin. God forgave you knowing every sin you will ever commit in your life. You know why? *Because that's what grace is*. We do not deserve God's forgiveness. We never have. We never will. Just because you are a seasoned believer by now does not make his forgiveness any less miraculous today than it was the day he saved you. God forgave us, and God forgives us, because of his grace and his goodness, not because of anything we have done or will do.

*But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).*

And you know what else? Nothing you do could ever change that. Nothing you do could ever take away the forgiveness and salvation that God has given you. You do not have to worry that he will abandon you in frustration. You do not have to worry that his patience will ever run out. God has forgiven you, and God has saved you, for all eternity. You are *his*, forever.

*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*

John 10:27–29

A P P L Y



The Israelites' sin and punishment in Numbers 14 have stained their history forever. It is not just another story, swallowed up by the immensity of the Old Testament. It is a major defining moment for the people of Israel. And it lives in infamy. We see it across the pages of Deuteronomy, Psalms, Amos, 1 Corinthians, and most notably, Hebrews 3–4. We read that passage two days ago as we began our devotion. The author of Hebrews says,

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,  
on the day of testing in the wilderness,  
where your fathers put me to the test  
and saw my works for forty years.  
Therefore I was provoked with that generation,  
and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart;  
they have not known my ways.’  
As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:7–13).

Look carefully at the warning that the author draws from the Israelites' sinful example: *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.* Like we talked about, the greatest sin of the Israelites was that *they did not believe.*



3. Are there any areas where you are struggling to believe God right now?

4. Is there anything causing you to harden your heart? Write down anything you can think of. How can you turn to God with those issues and glorify him?

## C L O S E

Finish today by jotting down some notes about our passage, then pray through the fifth-century words of Augustine.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Grant us, even us, O Lord, to know you, and love you and rejoice in you. And if we cannot do these perfectly in this life, let us, at least, advance to higher degrees every day, till we can come to do them in perfection. Let the knowledge of you increase in us here, that it may be full hereafter. Let the love of you grow every day more and more here, that it may be perfect hereafter; that our joy may be great in itself and full in you. We know, O God, that you are a God of truth. O make good your gracious promises to us, that our joy may be full. To your honor and glory, who with the Father and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns one God, world without end. Amen.<sup>20</sup>*

Augustine

# DAY 5

*numbers 15*

## P R E P A R E

*Great peace have those who love your law;  
nothing can make them stumble.*

Psalm 119:165

Begin your devotional time today by praising God for his law. Ask him to help you see his goodness and grace in his commands. Ask him to increase your love for his word.

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 15.

1. While chapter 14 is entirely narrative, chapter 15 abruptly switches to law. Why do you think this chapter about laws was specifically placed right here?

2. When are the instructions for sacrifices to be followed (verses 2 and 18)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. When the passage addresses intentional sins (doing anything “with a high hand”) in verses 30–31, there is no mention of sacrifices or forgiveness. Look up Numbers 5:5–8 and Leviticus 6:1–7. What must someone do when they sin intentionally?

#### THE LORD SPEAKS

As you read this chapter, I hope you were startled by the great contrast between the narrative in chapter 14 and the law in chapter 15. There is no mention of the Israelites’ disobedience or punishment; there is no transition between their defeat in battle and these new laws. We suddenly find ourselves in an unrelated chapter, out of the blue.

But as we know, *there is always more beneath the surface.*

And there is certainly more beneath the surface here. Did you notice how there is no reprimand after the Israelites wrongly went into battle? We are simply told that they were defeated (14:45). Moses does not scold them again. The Lord does not scold them. The narrative speaks for itself: they disobeyed the Lord and received their punishment.

But even after this further round of disobedience, there is still hope. The Lord is still faithful. And he proves it with the very first words of chapter 15: *the Lord spoke to Moses*. He is still with them. He is still speaking to them and guiding them. Despite all their unfaithfulness, he is still faithful. He is still present.

And beyond being with them, he is still giving them (the younger generation, that is) the land as he promised. Our God is a God who keeps his word. And by giving them these instructions, he is preparing them to enter the promised land. By giving them these instructions, he is showing them what a proper relationship with him looks like.

*Do you see how this seemingly irrelevant chapter is deeply connected to the story that came before it?* Their God is still with them! Their God still speaks with them! Their God is still preparing them to inherit the promised land! What a gracious, faithful God he is.

Let's look at each set of instructions in this chapter and see what they have to teach us today.

#### L A W S   A B O U T   S A C R I F I C E S

The first section (vv. 3–21) explains how much flour, oil, and wine should accompany each type of animal sacrifice. The larger the animal, the larger the grain and wine offering.

What we should notice about these instructions is that they are specifically for when the Israelites enter the promised land. Flour, oil, and wine were not the products of nomadic desert people; these were the products of farmers established in a fruitful land. The fact that God instructs them to make these sacrifices is yet another testament that he is bringing them to a rich land where they will prosper under his blessing. Even the sacrifices are gifts from a gracious God.

4. What gifts has your gracious God given you?

5. How are you serving him with those gifts?

## L A W S   A B O U T   U N I N T E N T I O N A L   S I N S

The second section (vv. 22–31) explains what to do if someone sins and fails to observe all these commandments. While there is a distinction between unintentional sins and intentional sins (those done “with a high hand”), both could be forgiven in God’s mercy.

What is most remarkable about this passage is how relevant it is for us today. Even though these laws were under the old covenant, they teach us a great deal about sin—which has not changed, even thousands of years later. So what should we learn from these verses?

First, sin requires a sacrifice of blood. If the congregation sins unintentionally, they shall sacrifice a bull. If one person sins unintentionally, he shall sacrifice a female goat. These sacrifices are “a pleasing aroma to the Lord,” and through them, the people shall be forgiven. The same is true for us today: *sin requires a sacrifice of blood*. Sometimes we think this no longer applies since we are no longer under the old covenant, but the same principle is still true. Sin still requires blood. The difference is that, instead of bulls or goats, our sacrifice is Christ. This is exactly what Hebrews 7–10 explains. Hebrews 9:11–12 says, “But when Christ appeared as a high priest... he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.” In fact, the entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament is an earthly copy of what Christ came to do in the heavenly realms (Heb 9:23–24). It teaches us that sin always requires blood, and it foreshadowed the one true sacrifice that took away sin for all time.

Second, this passage teaches us of the seriousness of sin. Even unintentional sins require sacrifices! Think about that for a minute. God is gracious in the fact that no consequences are mentioned for unintentional sins, but sacrifices are still required. That means that sin, even when it was not intended, is deeply grievous to God



and has no place in the lives of his people. We can never minimize the sin we commit. Right down to the little things—cutting someone off in traffic, telling our kids a “white lie” to keep them from freaking out, making excuses for why we could not spend time with someone—sin is unholy and offensive to God. It has no place in our lives as believers.

Third, this passage reminds us that God has given us his word so that we would know him—and know what pleases him and grieves him. God’s word teaches us what sin is and exposes it in our lives. And most importantly, God’s word offers us forgiveness and redemption from our sin. *That is why we must be in our Bibles constantly.* As Raymond Brown says, the Bible

is like a mirror that shows us what we are like in God’s sight. The regular reading and application of Scripture prevent us from accommodating to the increasingly immoral behavior patterns of the contemporary world. Without Scripture’s exposure of the seriousness of sin, we might easily become casual about it, indifferent to it, untroubled by it, even unafraid of it.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE SABBATHBREAKER

One man who was casual, indifferent, untroubled, and unafraid of sin was this man found gathering sticks on the Sabbath. This is a direct illustration of the intentional sin mentioned in verses 30–31. It may seem harsh to us today, but we must remember that this man was fully aware of the prohibition to do any work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:8–10, 31:14–17, 35:2–3). Let’s not forget, it was one of the ten commandments! Observing the Sabbath was a sign of the covenant; it was a sign of being the people of God. As such, this was a serious violation.

Ezekiel later attested that Israel repeatedly profaned the Lord’s Sabbath (Ezek 20:12–24). Jeremiah also prophesied the

destruction of Jerusalem because the Israelites violated the Sabbath (Jer 17:21–27). This was no minor, unintentional sin to overlook. This was a capital offense.

#### G A R M E N T T A S S E L S

Following this grim example of disobedience, the Lord commands the Israelites to make blue tassels for their garments as reminders of the commandments of the Lord. After all, *an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure*.

Blue was the same color of the cloth that covered the ark of the testimony when the Israelites set out (Num 4:6). It was the color of the curtains at the entrance of the tent (Ex 26:36). It was the color of the robe of the high priest (Ex 28:31). Certainly, it would have reminded the people of their relationship with God. It would have reminded them that they were his people, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6).

And the Lord also reminds them that he is their God. He is the great *I AM*. This was the name that the Lord told Moses when he first appeared to him in the burning bush. This is the name that we call *Yahweh*.

#### A P P L Y

1. We do not wear tassels on our garments today, but we still must remind ourselves to see our eyes on the Lord and nothing else. How do you “remember all the commandments of the LORD, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after”?

Chapter 14 closed with the disobedience and defeat of the Israelites, yet we see no further rebuke. All we see with the beginning of chapter 15 is the continued faithfulness of the Lord. He is still their God, teaching them and leading them to the promised land.

2. Do you struggle to believe that God is still faithful to you even when you are unfaithful to him? How can you better remind yourself of this truth?

3. Sometimes we have situations in our lives where it is hard to see God's faithfulness. In those times, it is always important to remind ourselves of God's faithfulness in the past. How has God been faithful to you in the past? Write down as many ways as you can think of.

4. How can you use your stories of God's faithfulness to encourage someone else this week?

## C L O S E

Finish today by praising God for his faithfulness and asking him to help you see his faithfulness more clearly this week. Pray through the lyrics of “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” and listen to it throughout your day. We did this back in week 3 too, but we just can’t get away from God’s faithfulness in Numbers. (I guess it’s kind of an important theme.)

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with Thee  
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not  
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be*

*Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me*

*Summer and winter and springtime and harvest  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love*

*Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow  
Blessings all mine with 10, 000 beside*

*Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness  
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me*

#### WEEK 3 MEMORY VERSES

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:12–13).

WEEK 4  
*numbers 16-19*

## MEMORY VERSE

1 TIMOTHY 2:5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.



# DAY 1

*numbers 16:1-35*

## P R E P A R E

*Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*

Hebrews 12:28–29

Prepare your heart today by asking God to fill you with reverence and awe for him. Quiet yourself for a minute, and seek God in the silence.

## R E A D

- > Read Numbers 16:1–35 today. Take it in slowly. Reread parts of it if you need to.

Ok, I'll be honest. Numbers 16 is my absolute favorite chapter in the entire book. I'll try to contain my excitement here, but this is a pretty amazing chapter. I mean, this is the very definition of "biblical proportions."

There are a lot of details in this narrative, so when you're done reading it, think through the questions below.

1. Who are the four men that rose up against Moses and Aaron, and what tribes are they from?



Once again, we see the interweaving of law and narrative—both dependent on one another and explaining one another. Now let's get started in our narrative. Verses 1 and 2 list the instigators: Korah (a Levite, the son of Kohath); Dathan, Abiram, and On (Reubenites); and 250 chiefs of the congregation. Interestingly, On is not mentioned again, and there is a connection between the Kohathites and the Reubenites. Remember the Lord's instructions for how the Israelites should camp by tribe in chapter 2? Look at the chart on page 332. The Kohathites and the Reubenites are camped right next to each other. Though the Kohathites, as part of the tribe of Levi, were camped there to guard the people from the tabernacle, Korah uses his position to spread dissention. He provokes the people, instead of protecting the people.

These instigators assembled against Moses and Aaron and stated their complaint: if everyone in the congregation is holy, then why have Moses and Aaron made themselves superior to everyone else? Obviously, the men are wrong in their accusation. Moses and Aaron have not set themselves over the congregation; the *Lord* has set them over the congregation. (I mean, seriously, how many times have we seen Moses try to get out of his leadership?) No, this was not something that Moses and Aaron chose for themselves. They were chosen by God. And because of that, the instigators' real complaint is not against them, but against God himself.

#### MOSES RESPONDS

And how does Moses respond? He falls on his face—just like he and Aaron did in 14:5 when the people rebelled and demanded to go back to Egypt. Though the entire group complained to Moses, Moses only responds to Korah at first. So why single out Korah? Hmm... Interesting question. Well, it is not unusual in Hebrew narrative for one party to be addressed at a time, like how we see Korah addressed here and Dathan and Abiram addressed in verse

12. But more importantly, *Korah is a Levite*. And not just a Levite, but a Kohathite! Look back at chapter 4. It was their divine responsibility to break down, transport, and protect the tabernacle when the Israelites set out. They were the ones to spread the blue cloth over the altar when it was moved—yet another connection to the end of chapter 15, with its blue tassels and reminder to be holy. He was supposed to be a spiritual protector of the people, but now he has caused spiritual rebellion.

Moses replies to him in two parts: 5–7 and 8–11. In the first part, he tells Korah and his company to take their censers, put fire in them, and put incense on them before the Lord. Then the Lord will decide who is holy. In other words, Moses takes no part in judging the instigators; he leaves that business to the Lord. And let's not forget that Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were killed for offering unauthorized fire before the Lord when he had not commanded them to do so (Lev 10:1–2). Moses ends his first statement by returning the allegation—rightfully so—back on Korah, saying that *he* has gone too far. Then in the second part of Moses' reply, we see what Korah is really getting at. As a Levite, he already had special responsibilities and privileges. They were separated by the Lord to do service in the tabernacle and minister to the people. But Korah wanted *more* than that. He wanted the most prominent position in the tabernacle—to be part of the Aaronic priesthood.

Then Moses turns to Dathan and Abiram. They do not have enough backbone to face him, but they manage to pass on their complaint. Though unlike Korah's, their complaint is very general. They, like the people have done before them, grumble about leaving Egypt to die in the wilderness. Once again, Moses faces the complaints of people who refuse to believe God's promises.

Then Moses turns to Korah, who is clearly the ringleader here, and instructs all the instigators to appear tomorrow to bring incense

before the Lord in the censers. We should notice two significant details here. First, even in his anger, Moses gives the rebels one more day to consider their actions and perhaps repent. Second, the act of putting incense in the censers and presenting them to the Lord was a duty of the priests alone—certainly not allowed for the Kohathites and Reubenites. Remember Numbers 3:10? *And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.* And beyond that, but in verse 18 we are simply told that each man “took his censer and put fire in them.” This contrasts with Moses’ instructions to Aaron in verse 46 to take fire directly from the altar. Certainly we are reminded, once again, of Nadab and Abihu’s unauthorized offering before the Lord—and their subsequent death for disobeying. As if we weren’t convinced of this already, things are definitely not looking good for the instigators.

Then Korah, our Levite ringleader, assembles the congregation at the tent of meeting. And what do you know? The glory of the Lord appears. Like we mentioned earlier, this is not Moses’ battle to fight. He leaves it to the Lord. (Perhaps a good reminder for some of us today.)

#### THE LORD RESPONDS

And who does the Lord speak to? Moses and Aaron! His chosen leaders! If there was any merit to the instigators’ complaints, the Lord may have spoken with Korah or Dathan or Abiram. But he didn’t, because they are not his spokesmen. The Lord chose Moses and Aaron, and they are the ones to whom he speaks directly.

And their response is absolutely remarkable. When the Lord says he will destroy the congregation—yes, *everyone*, all the Israelites—Moses and Aaron fall on their faces and beg God not to. They beg God to save the very people who *hate them*. They could have easily gone along with the Lord’s statement. After all, the people

are nothing but a headache for Moses and Aaron. They certainly deserved to die for their constant rebellion and disbelief, and the Lord would have been just to kill them.

*But Moses and Aaron ask for mercy on them.*

What a beautiful foreshadowing this is of the character of Christ. He pleads to God for our forgiveness, even though we deserve death. He gives us his grace, even though we deserve his judgment. He remains faithful to us, even though we are unfaithful to him.

Moses and Aaron's response here reflects the character of Christ, just as we should seek to reflect him too. We must recognize that people will complain about us and act unjustly towards us, even for things that have nothing to do with us—*especially for those in leadership or ministry*. But Moses and Aaron provide an example of leaders who focus their eyes exclusively on the Lord. They are not distracted by the accusations; they are not devastated by the personal attacks. They keep their eyes on the Lord, and they serve him wholeheartedly—regardless of what the people do or what they deserve.

What a wonderful example of the character of Christ. May we seek to imitate their example of keeping our eyes on God.

And how does the Lord response to Moses and Aaron's plea? He grants it! Just like he granted Moses' request not to kill the people in chapter 14. *If you are still questioning if your prayers really matter, the book of Numbers is out to settle any doubts*. Your prayers make a real difference in your life and the lives of those you pray for. Stay diligent in praying for God to do great things.

Then the Lord commands Moses to tell the congregation to get away from the dwelling of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. We already

mentioned that the Levites and the Reubenites camped next to each other, and we know from verses 12 and 14 that Dathan and Abiram remained in their camp, refusing to come to Moses. So Moses went to them and warned the people to get away from the wicked men and all of their sin-tainted possessions.

Thankfully, the people listen—for once. Dathan and Abiram finally come out and face Moses, though there is no mention of Korah here. And isn't it an interesting message that Moses gives them? He suggests that the Lord might open up the earth and the men be swallowed alive into Sheol. Hm, what an odd thing to suggest... unless, just as Moses attests, his words are not his own but from the Lord.

#### DIVINE PUNISHMENT

And the very moment Moses finishes speaking, the earth opens up, swallows the men and their households and their goods, and closes back over them. *I mean, the power of God is absolutely palpable here.* And as if the Israelites had not seen enough miracles from the Lord, they run in terror! Are they seriously surprised at this?? They walked on dry land across the parted waters of the Red Sea and witness the Lord release those waters to swallow up the Egyptians. Could he not do the same with the earth? How many times must they disbelieve the power of the Lord?

As they run wild, fire “came out from the Lord”—what a sight that must have been—and consumed the men who offered unauthorized incense. Big surprise there, right? Of course they were consumed by fire. That is exactly what happened to Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:2) and exactly what they were warned against (Num 3:10). They were playing with fire, and they received their just consequence.

## A P P L Y

I hope you are as astounded by this passage as I am. I mean, nothing says “biblical proportions” like the earth opening up and swallowing men whole. This chapter is an incredible testimony to the power and holiness of our God. And it wrecks me every time I read it.

I think, like we have mentioned before, there is often a tendency to distinguish the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament. Actually, as I am writing this right now, I am sitting in a café that offers free Bibles. Well, *part of the Bible*, to be specific. Psalms, Proverbs, and the New Testament. Because after all, the rest of the Old Testament is just white noise, right?

*We cannot fall into the mistake of thinking that the Old Testament is no longer useful or relevant or necessary.*

The God who opened the earth and called out fire and spread plagues is the same God who forgives us and saves us and sanctifies us today. The God who had power over all creation in the Old Testament is the same all-powerful God who holds your life in his hands today.

If we were to truly come to terms with this fact, I think our prayer life would look different. I think our worries would disappear. I think we would trust God in ways that we never have before.

1. Look through chapter 16 again and write down as many ways to describe God as you can.



2. Do you view God with those attributes? Why or why not?

3. What do you worry about the most right now? Why do you struggle to trust God in those areas?



## C L O S E

End today with our usual reading recap before taking a few minutes in prayer to praise God with reverence and awe.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire*

Hebrews 12:28–29

## WEEK 4 MEMORY VERSE

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

# DAY 2

*numbers 16:36–50*

## P R E P A R E

*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.*

1 Timothy 2:5–6

Start your devotion today by asking God to help you see Christ in the pages of the Old Testament. Ask him to help you understand and love his word more every day.

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 16:36–50.

1. How did the censers become holy (v. 37)?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. When do the Israelites grumble against Moses and Aaron?  
What is their complaint?

3. By now, we have seen Moses fall on his face several times. But this instance breaks the normal pattern. Look up 14:5, 16:4, and 16:22. What happens in each of these passages right after Moses falls on his face?

#### THE CENSERS

The legacy of the instigators lives on in one final act. Their censers would be used to remind all of Israel that no one may draw near to offer incense before the Lord without being authorized. This passage not only concludes the section on Korah, but also introduces the coming section, where Aaron's God-ordained role as high priest is once again confirmed. So let's look at this section.

It starts with the Lord speaking to Moses (per usual) and commanding Eleazar to take the censers out of the blaze. We have mentioned several times now that Aaron's first two sons, Nadab and Abihu, died offering unauthorized fire before the Lord. That makes Eleazar the eldest surviving son of Aaron. He collected the censers from among the burned bodies—undoubtedly a gruesome task, even though priests were familiar with death—which had “become holy” because they were purified by fire from God.

And the men who died had “sinned at the cost of their lives.” The smoldering field of bodies here should be a morbid reminder that

the cost of sin is our life. Though sin is advertised to us all day long with dazzling images, the putrid reality is death.

The Israelites must be reminded of this. The censers from the 250 rebellious chiefs are now used as a covering for the altar, to remind the people that no one can draw near to burn incense before the Lord without being commanded by him.

4. We talked about this last week with the passage about the tassels. How are you continuing to remind yourself of God's commands?

## THE PLAGUE

I don't know if anything can top the earth opening up and swallowing people whole, but this passage offers some stiff competition. Literally *the very next day* after the people fled screaming at the earth opening up and swallowing Korah and his household and his goods, they assemble against Moses and Aaron. They had just witnessed fire come out from the Lord and consume the 250 men offering unlawful incense the night before. And now they are assembling against Moses and Aaron, as if this had anything to do with them. *Are you kidding me?*

And let's be clear about one thing here. The Israelites say that Moses and Aaron "have killed the people of the Lord," but how could that be possible? Do Moses and Aaron have the power to open up the earth and call out fire? Certainly not. Only the Lord has that power. And beyond that, their accusation assumes that the deaths of the 250 wicked men was unjust. So not only do they refuse to credit God for his own miracles, but they claim that those miracles were unjust. This was not a simple affront to Moses and Aaron; this was a mass rejection of the power and the holiness of the Lord.

And it was the last straw. God has been abundantly patient and gracious with the Israelites. He has given them chance after chance to repent of their disbelief and turn back to him. But they still rebel. And in all the previous instances when Moses and Aaron fall on their faces, there is time for someone to speak before the Lord acts. Even when the Israelites deserve death, he waits and allows Joshua or Moses to plead on their behalf. But this time we do not see that. This time there is no speech before the Lord acts. The moment that Moses and Aaron fall on their faces, the plague begins to spread. In fact, it is so quick in the narrative that we only learn about it through Moses' instructions to Aaron! God's wrath has gone out and atonement must be made before all the people are destroyed.

And speaking of Moses' instructions, did you wonder why he doesn't just get up and make atonement himself? I mean, time is of the essence here. Why lie on your face and tell Aaron what to do instead of doing it yourself? Aha, but here we have the problem. Korah and his whole household and the 250 chiefs were just killed for offering incense unlawfully! Moses wasn't about to make the same foolish mistake. Taking fire from the altar and making atonement for the people was the responsibility of the priests alone. And Moses asks none other than the high priest himself to do it.

Aaron obeys in haste, running to the people with his incense. And as soon as he catches up with the far reaches of the plague, the death stops. And Aaron stands in between the living and the dead. The high priest, the mediator between the wrath of God and the sin of man, stands to reconcile the two.

And what is so startling about this passage is the fact that Aaron manages to outrun the plague. Think about that for a minute. The Lord could have killed the entire nation in an instant, but he doesn't. He spreads a plague among the people that is so slow that Aaron can run to the altar, gather fire, place incense on it, and run back to the people before it reaches 15,000 of them. Now, I realize that 14,700 is still a huge amount of people to die, but the Israelites were listed at over 600,000 men alone at the beginning of the book. The plague only reaches a small percentage of them. All of them were guilty; all of them deserved to die. But God only kills a very small portion of them. And we see, for the umpteenth time in the book of Numbers, the undeserved goodness and graciousness of our God.

Even in his wrath and his justice, *the Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*



At the same time, we must face the reality of the Israelites' sin. A mere 300 (or so) of them died rightfully as a result of their own wickedness, but the Israelites still have the gall to reject the Lord once again. And in doing so, they turn a tragedy into a catastrophe. What could have ended with the deaths of those 300 escalated into the deaths of 14,700. We must learn from this passage,

when we are warned by His rebukes, to humble ourselves beneath His mighty hand, since nothing is worse than to kick against the pricks; and let us always bear in mind what the psalm says, "Many are the sorrows of the wicked" (Ps 32:10). They rebelliously exclaimed that the people of the Lord were slain, when three hundred had perished; they now experience how much better it would have been to be dumb before God, and to give glory to His holy severity, than, instead of three hundred, to devote to destruction nearly fifty times as many.<sup>22</sup>

## A P P L Y

This passage has remained in my mind vividly over the last few weeks. I have wondered to myself, what about it is so striking? I always thought it was the imagery of life and death—the picture of the high priest holding his censer, standing among a sea of the dead and the living.

And I think that is part of it—but only part. The real reason this passage is so striking is because of the way it illustrates Christ's redemptive work. Aaron saved the people by making atonement with incense and fire from the altar. His offering turned away the wrath of God and brought forgiveness for the people. He did what only a priest could do; he did for them what they could not do for themselves.

In this passage, we see Aaron standing as mediator between a holy God and his unholy people, providing the sacrifice necessary to reconcile them. And this imagery of a mediator between God and

man, between life and death, directly foreshadows the person and work of Christ. The priests of the Old Testament had to offer sacrifices over and over again, but Christ offered himself once and for all. This is exactly what Hebrews 10:11–14 explains:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Aaron's sacrifice of incense was enough to stop the plague, but not enough to take away the sins of the people. He had to offer sacrifices day after day. Only Christ, who was God in flesh, could offer a sacrifice sufficient to cover the sins of God's people for all time. Only Christ could defeat death and stand as a mediator once and for all between the living and the dead.

When we read this passage about Aaron—when we see him offering atonement to God, standing in between life and death—we should immediately think of Christ. This is what Christ did for us. He offered himself, once and for all, to satisfy the wrath of God and give us life in place of death.

1. How does this truth encourage you today?

2. The author of Hebrews draws some conclusions from the fact that Christ offered a perfect sacrifice. Look up Hebrews 10:19–25. What does he instruct us to do as a result of this truth?

## C L O S E

The imagery in our passage today of Aaron making atonement, of him standing between the living and the dead, points directly to Christ. That's why our memory verse this week is 1 Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

Think about that truth as you go throughout your day. And of course, don't forget to jot down a few notes to remember these verses. May God richly bless you today in your meditation of him.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

### WEEK 4 MEMORY VERSE

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

# DAY 3

## *numbers 17*

### P R E P A R E

*Forgive our transgressions, our errors, our lapses and our weaknesses. Do not keep count of the sins of your servants but purify us through the gift of your truth and direct our steps. Help us to walk in holiness of heart and to do what is good and pleasing to your eyes.*<sup>23</sup>

Clement of Rome

The last few chapters have been heavy with the disobedience of the Israelites. If we are not careful, we see ourselves more closely with Moses than with the Israelites. But if we are honest with ourselves, we often act just like the Israelites. We rebel and disbelieve—over and over again.

Today, start by praying that God would forgive your *transgressions, errors, lapses, and weaknesses*. Pray that he would purify you and direct your steps. Pray that he would help you to walk in holiness and do what is pleasing to him.

### R E A D

> Read Numbers 17.

1. What are the first words of chapter 17? Why is that important?

2. How does this passage relate to what happened in chapter 16?

3. Look at 17:10. To whom are the grumblings actually directed?

## AARON AS HIGH PRIEST

At first, this passage may seem out of place, like a strange sequel to the plague episode. But this chapter is the last of three incidents which confirm Aaron as high priest. Think back to the first complaint in chapter 16. Korah assembles against Moses and Aaron because they have “exalted themselves above the assembly of the Lord.” Essentially, what Korah really wants is the priesthood for himself (16:10). Apparently it is not enough for him to be a Levite who guards the tent of meeting; he wants to be an Aaronite with the special responsibility of performing priestly duties.

But remember what the real accusation here is. Aaron did not choose this role for himself; the Lord did. So Korah’s complaint, at its core, is directed at the Lord. Moses affirms as much in his response by not taking matters into his own hands, but letting the Lord decide the outcome.

And what does the Lord do? He kills all those who offered unauthorized incense, all those who tried to take the priesthood for themselves. Yet Aaron also offered incense, and was not killed. The fact that he lived is a testament that the Lord chose him as high priest, and by extension his descendants as priests, in the first of three stories.

The second story to confirm Aaron, as we read about yesterday, is when Aaron takes fire from the altar to offer incense and stop the plague. Remember that each instigator in 16:18 merely “took his censer and put fire in them,” but Aaron takes his fire *directly from the altar* (16:46). And beyond that, the Lord accepts his offering and stops the plague in response. This is the second confirmation that Aaron, not Korah or anyone else, is the true high priest appointed by God.

## THE BUDDING STAFF

And now we arrive at the third confirmation: the budding of Aaron’s staff. The people so far have refused to accept Aaron’s

God-given role as high priest, and their grumblings against him were acts of rebellion. This test is out to set them straight. They must believe the word of the Lord and accept it in full obedience.

With this test, we see a significant reversal in the sequence of events. The first two stories begin with the people grumbling against Moses and Aaron, and the Lord responding to confirm Aaron's priesthood. But now we see the opposite, in both the order of events and the attitude of the people. Here, the Lord initiates Aaron's confirmation and the people respond by crying out for mercy. What's more, the previous two events result in death, whereas this event, initiated by the Lord, results in life.

Let's point out a few things about our passage.

First, the chapter opens with the Lord speaking to Moses. Once again, God has not abandoned his people—even in their disobedience. This should remind us of the transition between chapter 14 and chapter 15. The Israelites were defeated in battle, but there is no further rebuke. The Lord continues to speak to them and direct them. And we see a similar situation here. Many of the Israelites were killed by the plague, but there is no further rebuke at the end of that scene. Chapter 17 begins a fresh start, opening with the Lord speaking to his people and guiding them. Surely the Lord is gracious and faithful, even when the Israelites are not.

Second, the staff blossomed and bore ripe almonds. Did you wonder about that when you read it? I mean, why almonds? Seems like a strange choice. Well, the Hebrew name for it is "the watcher," which comes from the fact that it is the first of the trees to blossom. And what were the lines of Aaron and Levi, if not the watchers? They were the holy ones who stood as mediators between God and his people, keeping watch over the people them and teaching them to observe all that God had commanded them.



The were the spiritual “watchers” and protectors of Israel. Certainly the choice of almonds blossoming from the staff was a fitting one.

Third, like we already mentioned, this was the only confirmation of Aaron’s priesthood that was initiated by the Lord and not the people. While that may seem insignificant on the surface, think about that for a minute. Why did the Lord tell the people to perform this test anyway? Because he wanted the people to end their grumbling. He repeats this twice, once in verse 5 and again in verse 10. But why does he want them to end their grumbling? Because it is annoying? No, that is not it. Look at verse 10. He includes a small detail at the end of his speech. He wants to make an end of their grumblings against him—*lest they die*. The reason the Lord initiates this entire episode is because *he does not want them to die*. Yes, he reproaches them for their complaining here, but he also cares for them with a fatherly love and seeks to protect them—even from themselves. He knows their rebellious hearts. He knows they will complain again. And in anticipating this, he “restrains their impetuous fury, lest they should die. Thus in humbling us, he not only punishes our transgressions, but he has regard to what is profitable for us, and proves that he cares for us.”<sup>24</sup>

## A P P L Y

*Did you catch that?*

Let me repeat it again. *In humbling us, God not only punishes our transgressions, but he has regard to what is profitable for us, and proves that he cares for us.*

I am guessing that some of you out there are feeling the weight of being humbled. I am guessing some of you feel like God’s discipline means he despises you or has abandoned you. I am guessing some

of you are wondering how God could possibly bring any good from the pain you are enduring.

*But Numbers 17 shows us that God humbles us for our good.*

Numbers 17 shows us that God intervenes and takes the initiative to teach us and correct us, all for our own protection and benefit. It shows us that God cares for us deeply and does not abandon us, even in our disobedience.

If God is humbling or disciplining you right now, it is direct proof of his love for you. Proverbs 3:11–12 says, “Do not despise the Lord’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” God disciplines those whom he loves.

And he does not humble without a purpose. He humbles because he knows your weaknesses, your most painful habits of sin, and he is slowly breaking them to free you. He humbles you to make you more like Christ.

1. How is God disciplining or humbling you right now?



## C L O S E

In the midst of discipline and humbling, we must not focus entirely on our affliction and forget that God still gives life. Just look at the budding staff. He does what only he can do. He takes a piece of dead wood and sprouts life from it. He is a God who gives life.

And he gives life to you today.

Psalm 119:50 says, “This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life.”

Spend a few minutes closing today by asking God to “give you life.” Praise him that he sustains and blesses you through even the hardest times.

*Help me to see that although I am in the wilderness  
it is not all briars and barrenness.  
I have bread from heaven, streams from the rock,  
light by day, fire by night,  
thy dwelling place and thy mercy seat.  
I am sometimes discouraged by the way,  
but though winding and trying it is safe  
and short;  
Death dismays me, but my great high priest  
stands in its waters,  
and will open me a passage,  
and beyond is a better country.  
While I live let my life be exemplary,  
When I die may my end be peace.<sup>25</sup>*

## WEEK 4 MEMORY VERSE

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

# DAY 4

## *numbers 18*

### P R E P A R E

*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,  
the world and those who dwell therein,  
for he has founded it upon the seas  
and established it upon the rivers.*

Psalm 24:1–2

### R E A D

> Read Numbers 17:10–18:32.

1. What was the purpose of the three previous stories about Aaron?

2. How does chapter 18 relate to that purpose?

3. How did the Lord respond to the Israelites' cries in 17:12–13?
4. Look closely at verses 8–19. What offerings does the Lord instruct the priests to keep for themselves?

#### PRIESTLY AND LEVITICAL DUTIES

I hope you had your coffee before reading chapter 18. Captivating stuff, right? Ok, ok. Obviously this chapter is not as alluring as our last couple of chapters. But as we know—say it with me now— *“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”* Chapter 18 is important, and it serves a purpose. So let’s see what we can learn from it.

Hopefully what was obvious is the connection between this chapter and chapters 16–17. All three of them form a unit, starting with Korah’s grab for the priesthood, moving on to the three stories confirming Aaron as high priest, and finally ending with these instructions from the Lord directly to Aaron. This chapter, albeit an abrupt break from the preceding narrative, serves as a fitting conclusion to the confirmation of Aaron as high priest. Now that the Lord has shown, beyond a doubt, that the priesthood

belongs to Aaron, he gives Aaron and his descendants instructions for their service.

We have three neat sections within these instructions: 1–7, 8–20, and 21–32. Let’s look at each of them now.

#### GUARDS OF THE TENT

Did you notice how this section opens? The Lord spoke to *Aaron*. That is certainly a change of pace! The Lord always speaks to Moses (or sometimes Moses and Aaron), but now he speaks directly to Aaron—once again, a confirmation of his God-given role as high priest.

Then the Lord begins by addressing the Levites. Remember the first few chapters of Numbers? The Lord outlined their responsibilities. They were charged with guarding the tent of testimony, though the priests were the only ones allowed to approach the altar. In 3:10, he said, “And you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall guard their priesthood. But if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death.” We see the same command repeated here in 18:7—though it strikes a different nerve after the Korah incident, now doesn’t it?

The Lord also says that he gives the Levites to the priests as a gift, to minister to them and to guard them. And isn’t that remarkable? The priests themselves were a gift to Israel—they made the sacrifices necessary to cleanse the people and restore them to their God—and yet God is giving *them* a gift! They were a blessing to all the tribes of Israel, including the Levites, and the Levites in turn were a blessing to the priests. Certainly this is a beautiful picture of how the people of God work together and serve one another. Let us always remember that our God knows what we need, both individually and collectively, and he provides for those needs, both individually and collectively.

#### INHERITANCE FOR THE PRIESTS

Speaking of providing for needs, how are the priests going to feed themselves and provide for their families if they exclusively work in the tabernacle? It's not like they had a normal trade and could raise cattle or grow crops. But God, of course, having designed this system himself, designed it perfectly.

In the second section, verses 8–20, the Lord instructs the priests that they are to receive parts of the sacrifices, first fruits of the harvest, and first-born animals. Their families may also eat these offerings, as long as they were ritually clean (meaning, no skin diseases, bodily discharges, or contact with a dead body). Since they did not receive a normal inheritance, the Lord claimed himself as their inheritance.

Verse 15 says that every firstborn in Israel, both man and animal, belongs to the priests. They must sacrifice them as usual, and then they and their families may eat them. This presents a dilemma, however, when it comes to children and unclean animal, since the priests obviously cannot sacrifice either of those things. So the solution is to “redeem” them, that is, for the owner to make a payment to the priest instead of giving them the child or animal. The price of a firstborn child is five shekels, which comes out to about six months of wages.<sup>26</sup>

These instructions are “covenant of salt forever” between the Lord and his priests. Though the phrase is strange, it certainly speaks to the qualities of preservation and permanence. These instructions were not just for a time; they were part of the lasting covenant between the Lord and his people.

Once again, we see that the Lord provides for his people. The priesthood was a sacred responsibility, and with it came sacred provisions from the Lord.

## INHERITANCE FOR THE LEVITES



While the priests receive most of the offerings for their livelihood, the Levites receive a tithe. Leviticus 27:30–32 specifies that the tithe applies to “seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees” and “herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman’s staff.” So the people would give 10 percent of their grain, fruit, and herd production to the Levites in return for the services they perform for the tent of meeting. This would compensate for the fact that, as we will see in later chapters, were not assigned a large inheritance of land as the other tribes were.

But just as the people give a tenth of their produce to the Levites, the Levites are to give tenth percent of what they receive to the priests. After they have given their tithes to the priests, they were free to eat their tithes when and where they like.

## A P P L Y

What should be abundantly clear when we read this chapter is that the Lord provides for his people. And specifically, in this context, he provides for those who minister through tithes and offerings. (Sounds a little familiar, doesn’t it?)

In most of our minds, it probably brings up the question of modern-day tithes. Are we still obligated to tithe? Does a tithe have to be ten percent? Do we have to tithe to our church?

All great questions. And if you haven’t wrestled with them yet, it’s time. So let’s talk about this.

First, we are no longer under the Old Testament law. We are not required to bring a tenth of the grain, fruit, and animals we produce. (Which is pretty great, since all we have is an orange tree and a half-dead grapefruit tree.) But having said that, both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that God’s people should give away a portion of their income. In the New Testament, we see this in 1 Corinthians 16:1–2, where Paul says,

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 9:6–7, he says,

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

The amount that you give is between you and the Lord, but the New Testament clearly teaches that we should give away a portion of our income.

Second, we should discuss where to direct our generosity. People often wonder if donations to parachurch organizations, like missionaries, evangelists, or campus ministries, count as tithing. These are wonderful gifts to give, and certainly should be encouraged. In fact, Paul spends two chapters in 2 Corinthians 8–9 urging the believers to give generously to the poor in Jerusalem. At the same time, both the Old and New Testaments direct God's people to give to the local church. This is exactly what we have seen here in Numbers 18 (and elsewhere in the Old Testament, like Dt 14:28–29, Neh 10:37–38, 13:5). In the New Testament, Paul praises the Philippians for their gifts to his ministry as “a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (Phil 4:18). In 1 Corinthians 14:12, he commands the believers to “strive to excel in building up the church,” which certainly includes their financial generosity. Finally, and most to the point, 1 Timothy 5:17–18 says,

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

From these passages, it is clear that the New Testament expects believers to give generously to support their local church and to support the poor in their community. This should cause us a bit of introspection, as we ask ourselves, *Am I someone who is characterized by generous giving? Do I give generously all year long? Or do I only give generously in December?*

I think one of our biggest problems when it comes to generosity is that we think of our things as *our things*. It's my car, my house, my savings account, my vacation. After all, we earned them, right?

Well... let's stop right there for a moment. God certainly blesses hard work and wants us to enjoy his blessings, but we will never fully enjoy our blessings or fully glorify God for those blessings if we do not first recognize that *God owns it all*.

Did that sink in? *God owns it all*.

Let's take a minute to remind ourselves of that.

*The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof (Ps 24:1).*

*All the earth is mine (Ex 19:5).*

*For the world and its fullness are mine (Ps 50:12).*

*Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine (Job 41:11).*

*In his hand are the depths of the earth;*

*the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it,  
and his hands formed the dry land (Ps 95:4–5).*

*Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of  
my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the  
LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth  
(Dt 8:17–18).*

*What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received  
it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor 4:7).*

We need this reminder. So often we forget that everything on earth belongs to him, and that everything we have comes from him. He owns it all, and we are his stewards.

*So what kind of a steward are you?*

1. Have you “decided in your heart” (2 Cor 9:7) how much to give to your local church? If you are married, have you and your husband discussed and come to an agreement about how much to give?



## C L O S E

Take a moment to write down what our passage was about, then close by praying through these verses about God's great power.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Yours, O LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O LORD, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.*

1 Chronicles 29:11–13

### WEEK 4 MEMORY VERSE

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

# DAY 5

*numbers 19*

## P R E P A R E

*Lord our God, great, eternal, wonderful in glory, who keeps covenant and promises for those who love you with their whole heart; who are the life of all, the help of those who flee to you, the hope of those who cry to you; cleanse us from our sins, secret and open, and from every thought displeasing to your goodness. Cleanse our bodies and souls, our hearts and consciences, that with a pure heart and a clear soul, with perfect love and calm hope, we may venture confidently and fearlessly to pray to you.<sup>27</sup>*

Basil

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 19–20:1.

1. How does this chapter fit with what comes before and after it?





## L A W S F O R P U R I F I C A T I O N

Can I just admit something for a minute? I grew up in the church, but I never really understood Old Testament laws and sacrifices. Maybe you feel the same way. Studying Numbers has clarified a lot for me, and I hope it has helped for you too.

This chapter is no different. It gives us great insight into the theology and practice of Old Testament purification from contact with the dead, though its placement here might seem strange at first. I mean, why talk about it now? Why not just pile up all the laws and regulations in one place and be done with it? Well, there is a place for that. (Hello, Leviticus.) But in Numbers, we see God providing instruction for his people as they have need. We read a story, then we see God respond with related instructions. There is a constant interweaving of narrative and law.

And that is exactly what we see here. There have been a few instances of death recently—like, I don't know, when the earth opened up and swallowed Korah and his entire household, or when fire consumed the 250 men who unlawfully offered incense, or when 14,700 people died from the plague—so it makes sense that we would now see instructions for coming into contact with the dead. And if you looked ahead, you know that the death of Miriam is coming in 20:1. Certainly the book of Numbers has a morbid inclination, and these instructions are timely.

But first things first. Let's address the elephant in the room. Why is coming into contact with the dead such a big deal in the first place? The answer comes down to the character of God. He intended life in the garden, but we chose death in our sin. Though he created us in his image, that image is now corrupted (though not lost entirely) by sin. Death is seen here "as a mirror of God's curse."<sup>28</sup> The grave is a reminder that this is not how it should be. Death is a direct offense to the living God. He is the God of life; the corruption of death may have no place among the perfect God.

## THE RED HEIFER

But God has a solution to purify whatever comes in contact with the dead. The first half of the chapter (vv. 1–10) explains how the priest should make a sin offering, though this offering was distinctly unique. The animal must be a cow (as opposed to a bull), red (as opposed to any color), and slaughtered outside of camp (as opposed to on the altar). Beyond this, the priest plays a rather minor role in this offering, while other men are given the task of burning it and gathering the ashes. But most peculiar of all, this offering makes those involved unclean and those uninvolved clean; it is a sacrifice that would “purify the defiled and defile the pure.”<sup>29</sup>

This sacrifice also called for cedarwood, hyssop, and crimson yarn. Though we use “hyssop,” a plant not native to the region, as an English translation, the Hebrew word more likely refers to marjoram, sage, or thyme.<sup>30</sup> These two elements, according to the rabbis, were “added in great quantities to provide ample ashes,”<sup>31</sup> while the color of the yarn clearly symbolizes the blood which is required for purification.

## THE UNCLEAN PEOPLE

Yet for all its peculiarity, this sacrifice had an important purpose. Leviticus already gave instructions for dealing with uncleanness due to death (Lev 5:2–6): the unclean person would bring a lamb or a goat to the priest as a sin offering. As you can imagine, this was a difficult and costly procedure. It could add greatly to the strain of a family already dealing with the death of a loved one. This offering provides an immediate, free alternative to sacrificing a lamb or goat. All the priest needs to do is mix some ash from the heifer with fresh water and sprinkle it on whoever or whatever came in contact with the dead

## A P P L Y

We must not get too lost in the details that we forget the most basic truths about chapter 19. Our God is a holy God, and no impurity can stand in his presence. That presents a bit of a problem for us as humans, since we are impure on our own. But God does not leave us this way. He does not abandon us in our impurity. He desires us to draw near to him, and the only way that can happen is if we are purified first.

So God purifies us. Not because we deserve it (because we most certainly do not), but because he is merciful. In the Old Testament, he purified his people through the blood of animals. In this instance, it was through the blood of an unblemished red cow. Only those who were clean could make the sacrifice, and yet in doing so, it rendered them unclean. It purified the defiled and defiled the pure.<sup>32</sup>

But the blood of animals could never take away sin. It purified God's people to be in his presence, but it did not solve the problem of sin. So at just the right time, according to the plan and purpose of God, he sent Christ to be our unblemished, perfect sacrifice. He, who was clean, made the sacrifice that yielded him unclean (2 Cor 5:21). And we, who were unclean, were made clean by it. That is what Christ does. He takes our sin and our guilt and our impurity on himself, and in exchange he gives us his righteousness.

His blood did what no animal blood ever could; his blood paid the penalty for all the sin of God's people for all time.

## C L O S E

As we usually do, finish today by writing down the significance of this passage in your own words. Then pray through and listen to the old hymn "There is a Fountain Filled with Blood."

Passage:

What it is about:

Why it is important:

Biblical truth to meditate on today:

*There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains:  
Lose all their guilty stains,  
Lose all their guilty stains;  
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,  
Lose all their guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away:  
Wash all my sins away,  
Wash all my sins away;  
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away.*

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood  
Shall never lose its pow'r,*

*Till all the ransomed Church of God  
Be saved, to sin no more:  
Be saved, to sin no more,  
Be saved, to sin no more;  
Till all the ransomed Church of God  
Be saved to sin no more.*

*E'er since by faith I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die:  
And shall be till I die,  
And shall be till I die;  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
And shall be till I die.*

*When this poor lisping, stamm'ring tongue  
Lies silent in the grave,  
Then in a nobler, sweeter song  
I'll sing Thy pow'r to save:  
I'll sing Thy pow'r to save,  
I'll sing Thy pow'r to save;  
Then in a nobler, sweeter song  
I'll sing Thy pow'r to save.*

WEEK 4 MEMORY VERSE  
For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and  
men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5).

WEEK 5  
*numbers 20-21*

## MEMORY VERSE

ROMANS 8:28

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

# DAY 1

*numbers 20:1–13*

## P R E P A R E

*May the power of God preserve us. May the wisdom of God instruct us and the way of God direct us. May the hand of God protect us and the host of God guard us against the snares of evil and the temptations of the world.<sup>33</sup>*

Patrick

## R E A D

> Start by reading Exodus 17:1–7, which happened first, then read Numbers 20:1–13.

1. Find Kadesh on the map on page 332. What happened there earlier in Numbers? (Spoiler: see 13:26.)
  
2. What specific foods do they ask for in verse 5? What food did the spies bring back with them from the promised land in 13:23?



3. How did Moses disobey the Lord?

4. How did Aaron disobey the Lord?

#### THE OPENING SCENE

Back to narrative we go! Chapter 20 opens quite differently than the previous two chapters on laws for priests and purification. Though we are not given the year, we are told that it is the first month—the same month in which the people were delivered from Egypt and should be celebrating the Passover. We are also given two pieces of information that indicate a great shift in the story: the return to Kadesh and the death of Miriam.

The people have now arrived in Kadesh, which is exactly where they were camped when the spies returned with their report of the promised land. At that time, as we know, they disbelieved and disobeyed the Lord. But the fact that the people have returned to this decisive city gives hope that this is their second chance. There is an expectation that the people may have finished their wandering and are finally ready to enter the promised land.

We are also told that Miriam died and was buried here. The Lord promised that none of the generation that came out of Egypt

would see the promised land (14:22–23, 29–30). Now we see that promise fulfilled for Miriam, as it will be fulfilled for Aaron at the end of the chapter. Once again, just like the hope sparked by the arrival in Kadesh, there is hope of entering the promised land with the deaths of these two leaders. The wandering has drawn to an end and the promised land is near.

#### THE PEOPLE COMPLAIN

And now.... that hope is on ice. That was short-lived, wasn't it? The people have finally returned to Kadesh, they have the chance for a fresh start, and what do they do? Complain. Just like they said back in 14:3, they wish they were dead. Ironically, they call themselves "the assembly of *the Lord*." But perhaps those who really are of *the Lord* would trust his promises and not ask to die, nor would they blame Moses for "making" them come up out of Egypt when that was so clearly a miracle of the Lord.

And more ironic, the people complain that there are no figs or vines or pomegranates in the desert—but those are exactly the foods that the spies brought back from Canaan! The people had their chance to live in a land of figs and vines and pomegranates, but they refused to enter it. And now they have the audacity to complain that they don't have those foods? *Are you kidding me?*

But the root of the issue is not even about the food or the water; the root of the issue is their continual refusal to believe God and his promises. They continually claim that they would be better off dead and that "Moses" (or really, *the Lord*) was wrong to bring them out of Egypt. It is a matter of disbelief, made all the worse by complaining.

#### MOSES DISOBEYS

Exasperated by their customary grumbling, Moses and Aaron go to the tent of meeting and fall on their faces before the Lord. Then the Lord gives them instructions to get water. They must take the staff, assemble the congregation, and tell the rock to yield its

water. In the Exodus story the Lord instructs Moses to use the staff that he used to strike the Nile, but here he does not specify which staff (v. 8). It seems likely Moses took Aaron's staff that had blossomed and produced almonds, since we are told in verse 9 that Moses took the staff "from before the Lord."

Remember that staff? The one that the Lord specifically commanded to keep before the testimony, in order to "make an end of their grumblings" (17:10)? If it was indeed Aaron's staff that Moses took, the visual reminder to the Israelites was far from subtle. But whichever staff it may have been, one thing is clear: that staff had seen miracles before, and it should have been a firm reminder to the Israelites not to disbelieve the Lord or grumble against him.

The command to speak to the rock—an inanimate object—is not insignificant either. Some believe that it is a reproach to the people, as if "in the lifeless elements there was more reason and intelligence than in men themselves."<sup>34</sup> After all, it would have been a great shame to the Israelites if the rock, as if it could hear and respond, had obeyed God's voice while his people, "to whom the Law had been given, remained in deafness and stupidity."<sup>35</sup>

But Moses never speaks to the rock. When he and Aaron had gathered the people, Moses says, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Surely he was angry with them; that much is confirmed in Psalm 106:33: "They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips." And beyond anger, his words are also self-glorifying ("shall we bring water?"), as if he and Aaron could have done that on their own. And the very moment before he disobeys God, he calls the Israelites *rebels*. (A little hypocritical, don't you think, Moses?) Then he lifts up his hand, and instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes it—not once, but twice.

It is hard to know that Moses was thinking here, and plenty of suggestions have been made over the centuries. The verses in Psalms indicate that he perhaps acted rashly out of anger. But even if that was the case, the Lord clarifies in verse 12 that Moses did not believe him. He wasn't much better than the Israelites at this point, giving in to the same temptation of disbelief that he had repeatedly seen in them.

But miraculously, the Lord still causes water to come out—and come out *abundantly*! Despite Moses' disobedience, the Lord still provides for his people. He continues to lavish his grace on his them, no matter how undeserved it may be.

As for Moses and Aaron, there would be consequences. They would not be allowed to bring the people to the promised land, for they had not treated God's name as holy in the eyes of the people—quite a turn of events in the city whose very name means *holy place*. It is hard to see how Aaron is guilty in all this. After all, he is not the one who snaps at the people or strikes the rock. But the Lord makes it clear that both of them had disbelieved and not upheld his name as holy. We know this from verse 12, where the Lord condemns both of them equally. Though we cannot see it in English, he uses the plural *you* instead of the singular *you*, thus vocalizing Aaron's silent disobedience. And in learning of Aaron's inward defiance, we should remember “that our works, on the surface of which nothing but virtue is apparent, are often abounding in secret defects, which escape the eyes of men, but are manifest to God alone.”<sup>36</sup>

## A P P L Y

After years of watching the Israelites disbelieve and disobey the Lord, Moses falls into the same temptation. He does not trust that the Lord will bring water out of the rock if he simply commands it to do so. Instead, he falls back into doing what he did last time.





## C L O S E

Close today by praying that God would strengthen your faith and remove any disbelief in your heart. Pray that your example of unwavering faith would strengthen those around you and cause them to further trust and glorify God.

*Merciful God, good Lord, I wish that you would unite me to that fountain, that there I may drink of the living spring of the water of life with those others who thirst after you. There in that heavenly region may I ever dwell, delighted with abundant sweetness, and say, "How sweet is the fountain of living water which never fails, the water welling up to eternal life." O God, you are yourself that fountain ever and again to be desired ever and ever and again to be consumed. Lord Christ, always give us this water to be for us the "source of the living water which wells up to eternal life."<sup>37</sup>*

Columbanus

## WEEK 5 MEMORY VERSE

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

# DAY 2

*numbers 20:14–29*

## P R E P A R E

Before you jump in today, take a minute to calm your heart before God. Ask him to teach you through his word, and to open your eyes how he is working all things together for your good.

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*

Romans 8:28

## R E A D

> Read Numbers 20:14–29.

> Then look at the map on page 332. Where are the Israelites currently, and where is Edom?

1. What does this chapter open and close with (verses 1 and 28)?

2. Why do you think Edom refused to let Israel pass through?



3. If the king of Edom would not let them pass through, what is this section (vv. 14–21) included at all?

During our first week, we looked at the basic structure of Numbers. Now is a good time to review it:

- I. Preparing to leave Sinai (chapters 1–10)
- II. The journey from Sinai to Moab (chapters 11–21)
- III. In the plains of Moab, preparing to enter the Promise Land (chapters 22–36)

Like we talked about yesterday, the Israelites are finally reaching the end of their wandering in the wilderness. They are about to set out from Kadesh on their final journey to the promised land. Since they already tried to enter the promised land (13:2) and failed (14:33), there is a hopeful expectation that this time will be different.

In our reading today, we have two distinct units: the king of Edom refusing passage to Moses (14–21) and the death of Aaron (22–29). Let's look at both of these.

#### EDOM REFUSES MOSES

In our first section, Moses asks the king of Edom twice to pass through his land, and both times the king refuses—bringing an army out against Israel on the second refusal. It seems odd that Edom refuses the humble request, especially since he gives no

reason, but it is also odd that the entire exchange is included in our text when we simply could have been told that Edom refused Israel passage.

There are several things to notice in response to this.

First, Moses calls himself a “brother” (v. 14) to the Edomites. In Genesis 25:30 and 36:1, we are told that the Edomites are descendants of Esau. The Israelites are obviously descendants of Israel—whose original name was Jacob, Esau’s brother. Both countries descended from two brothers, but apparently the reminder of the family connection does nothing to sway the king of Edom. He never specifies why he refuses their passage, but it seems he is too worried the Israelites might steal their resources or attack the Edomites.

Second, we see Moses’ character revealed in the dialogue. Edom does not believe in the Lord, but Moses provides a powerful testimony of his works. At the same time, we see no mention of Moses praying and asking God to help them. He is also careful to follow the standard form of a diplomatic letter at that time, which includes the recipient (14), the formula “thus says,” the sender, the present predicament, and the request.<sup>38</sup> But even with proper, courteous protocol, Edom still refuses his request—which leads us to our third and most important detail about this passage.

Ultimately, it was part of God’s plan that Edom should refuse passage to Israel. He certainly could have changed the mind of the king or given the Israelites victory over them, but he does neither. Instead, he allows the Israelites to backtrack and go around Edom. He allows their faith to be tested again. And ultimately, he allows himself to be further glorified.

This should be a sober reminder to us that God does not always make things go as we plan. He does not always carry out his will in

the ways that seem easiest to us. He was indeed leading the Israelites to the promised land, but not along the shortest, easiest route. He took them the long way, full of trials and testing.

And often, the same is true in our lives. God often carries out his will for our lives in ways that are long and difficult and trying. He does not promise that the journey will be easy; what he promises is that he will guide us and provide for us every step along the way. And we can have confidence that the long journey is always for our good and for his glory.

Perhaps God is taking you on a longer, more difficult journey than you expected. Perhaps he did not use the way that seemed easiest to you. Perhaps you are left wondering what on earth he is doing and how this is ever going to work out.

But Numbers 20 should remind us that God often uses the long and difficult route—*for our good and for his glory*.

Usually it is hard to see this in the moment, but looking back we can see all the ways that God was faithful. Back in 2016, when Randy was working at our old church in Fountain Hills, our senior pastor retired and hired a new pastor. We had some very different beliefs, both in our theology and our philosophy of ministry, and we knew we could not stay there much longer. After several months of trying to make it work, Randy finally quit. We had no jobs lined up, and no idea what we would do. It was Christmas at the time, but as the youth pastor, Randy stayed until May to finish the school year with the students and give the church time to find a replacement.

Well, May comes around, and you know what we still didn't have? Jobs. Or any idea of where we would live. Or what we would do. But after having our house on the market for several months, we finally sold it. And you know when we closed? On the very last day

of Randy's job. Coincidence? I think not. God kept us in our house until the very last day we needed to be in Fountain Hills. (Is he a good God or what?)

Since we still didn't have anywhere to go or any job prospects (even after applying for jobs over the last 6 months), we decided to buy a trailer and travel. We left our church. We left our community. We had no idea where God was leading us, but we were just hoping it wouldn't take very long. We were spiritually homeless, and that was something we never wanted.

Eventually, we moved in with Randy's family and it was time to start looking for a church. Honestly, that was something we had never done before. We had always gone to the churches that Randy worked at, so we never had to find one before. And it was a daunting task. We still had two years left of seminary before Randy would graduate and be back in full-time ministry (if not before then). What would happen if he got a job somewhere else after graduation, and we had to leave our new church all over again? Five years was way too short with our old church; certainly two years would not be enough with our new church. We dreaded the thought of starting new relationships and rebuilding our community, just to have it torn apart again two years later. We desperately wanted to find a "forever" church home—even though we knew that wasn't going to happen yet.

At this point it is August, and we still don't have jobs. Yep. December to August, and no luck. We were seriously wondering what God was doing right about now. Finally, after a few more weeks, Randy got a job at the seminary. It wasn't the ministry job we were hoping for, but it was perfect for that time. Randy had to be at the school for classes anyway, and this gave him the flexibility schedule he needed (plus free tuition as an employee—thank you, Lord).

And after visiting two churches that weren't right for us, we weren't sure where to go. There weren't a whole lot of churches in our area that preached through books of the Bible, so there weren't many choices. And we certainly weren't going to try a church whose theology we didn't agree with; we had just gone through that and it was devastating.

Randy's grandma suggested we try a little Bible church she knew of down the road. Well, you know how that goes. "Bible church" could mean anything. So we tried to pull up their website to check their statement of faith. But there wasn't one. We had no idea what this church believed, and after three months without a church community, we really didn't want to waste a Sunday at some place with different beliefs.

But here's the thing: we didn't have anywhere else to go that Sunday. Our top two choices had fizzled out, and we hadn't found a good third choice. So even though we thought we would regret it, we took grandma's advice and headed to the Bible church.

Well, little did we know, that would be our last first time at a church. We found all sorts of weird connections with this little church we had never heard of before. We found out that Chuck graduated from our seminary years before, and we both ran into old friends we knew from high school and college. We were completely refreshed by how much of the Bible was read during the sermon. And most of all, we were blown away by how friendly and caring everyone was. (You're surprised by that, I know.)

We were thrilled to find a church. We absolutely loved them. But at the same time, it was kind of bittersweet. We were still worried that we would have to leave this new community in a couple years after Randy graduates.

But sometimes we worry about really silly things. And God is watching us thinking, *when will you learn that I am taking care of everything?*

Well, it was just over a year later when CBC asked Randy to start working there part-time. In all honesty, we were blown away. I mean, it was Randy's dream to work at a church near his family in northwest Peoria. And this church was literally one mile from his parents' house. *Could that be any more perfect or what?*

Randy was honored to work at CBC, but he also wanted to make sure they knew his plans were to be in full-time ministry. There was still a chance that he would need to take a full-time job somewhere else after he graduated the following year. But everyone thought that this was where God was leading, and he gladly accepted.

Once again, the things we worry about are just too funny.

It was only a few months after that conversation that they asked Randy to become full-time. Right after he graduated, he had a full-time job at his dream church in his dream neighborhood. Seriously, how does this even happen?

Well, funny story, the church had the savings to cover Randy's salary, but not the income. They had decided it was just time to make a big change. They would dip into savings to cover Randy's salary if they needed to, but they were going to try to make this work. And if they ran out of money, they ran out of money. But at least they would have given it their best shot.

Did I mention this was a few months before covid?

Randy was already not sure how long the church would be able to support his position, and then covid rolls around. After all this

time—after months of applying for jobs in ministry and trying to find the right church and trying to recover from having to leave our old church—would we be back at square one? Would we have to start all over again?

Seriously, we worry about the silliest things.

God did *not* deplete the church's savings account that year. God grew it *abundantly*. Even with all of the new expenses, church tithes increased by 50% in 2020.

*Are you serious, God?!*

Let's make one thing very clear. *Our God is a good and gracious God.* He often takes us on the long, difficult route. He often carries out his will in ways that seem very difficult or challenging for us. *But he guides us and provides for us every step of the way.* And he does it for our good and for his glory.

Let me say that again. *God uses every difficult situation in your life for your good and for his glory.* He carries us through them. He loves us through them. And he brings us out on the other side with far more blessings than we ever could have imagined.

1. Think about your life over the last few years. Though you may not have understood it at the time, how has God been faithful to you in the last 5 years? The last 3 years? The last year?

- 
2. If you could go back in time and give your younger self some encouragement about how God was working in your life, what would you say?



3. What are you going through now that seems like the “long and difficult” journey? How might God be using that for your good and for his glory?

4. How is God guiding you and providing for you right now, even though you may not understand his plan?

## THE DEATH OF AARON

After Edom refuses passage, the Israelites “turned away from him” and journeyed from Kadesh to Mount Hor. We are not sure where Mount Hor is today, but that matters little to the story. It is at this mountain where the Lord speaks to Moses and Aaron, and tells them Aaron is about to die—or to use the Hebrew idiom, which is the usual way to describe the death of an old righteous man, that Aaron “shall be gathered to his people.” This is exactly how the deaths of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses are described (Gen 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Num 31:2). On the other hand, those who died under divine judgement were said to be left unburied and not “gathered” (Jer 8:2; 25:33; Ezek 29:5).<sup>39</sup> But the phrase is more than simply an idiom; it expresses the Israelites’ belief in life after death. They had full expectation that all those who followed God would be united together after they died.

So Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the people. Before he passed, Moses took Aaron’s high priest garments off him and put them on his son, a visual confirmation that Eleazar had now become the high priest. When Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain without Aaron, and the people realized he had died, they wept for thirty days.

Those are all the details we are given. It certainly isn’t much for the death of Israel’s first high priest. It is somber and succinct. Aaron’s sentencing is given in verse 12 and carried out in verse 28. Two of the three great siblings have passed, and now we await Moses’ death outside the border of the promised land.

But for its brevity and unadornment, we still see several truths in this passage. First, we must live with the consequences of our sin. Second, the Lord is faithful to fulfill his promises. Third, we do not dread death nor view it as the end, but we look forward to the day when we are “gathered to our people,” and most importantly, to our Lord.

## A P P L Y

We already went through some reflection questions about our passage, so take a moment now to write down some details about our passage.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

## C L O S E

Finish today by listening to “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” and praying through the lyrics. Listen to it throughout your day, and let it turn your heart to praise for his faithfulness.

*Come, Thou Fount of every blessing  
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace  
Streams of mercy never ceasing  
Call for songs of loudest praise  
Teach me some melodious sonnet  
Sung by flaming tongues above  
Praise the name! I'm fixed upon it  
Name of Thy redeeming love*

*Hitherto Thy love has blessed me  
Thou hast brought me to this place*

*And I know Thy hand will bring me  
Safely home by Thy good grace  
Jesus sought me when a stranger  
Wandering from the fold of God  
He, to rescue me from danger  
Interposed His precious blood*

*Oh to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee  
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it  
Prone to leave the God I love  
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it  
Seal it for Thy courts above  
Oh that day when freed from sinning  
I shall see Thy lovely face  
Full arrayed in blood-washed linen  
How I'll sing Thy sovereign grace  
Come, my Lord, no longer tarry  
Bring Thy promises to pass  
For I know Thy pow'r will keep me  
Till I'm home with Thee at last*

WEEK 5 MEMORY VERSE

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

# DAY 3

*numbers 21:1–20*

## P R E P A R E

*You, O Lord, who command us to ask, grant that we may receive. You have put us on seeking; let us be happy in finding. You have bidden us knock; we pray you open to us. Be graciously pleased to direct and govern all our thoughts and actions, that for the future we may serve you and entirely devote ourselves to obeying you. Accept us, we ask you, and draw us to yourself, that we may henceforth be yours by obedience and love, who are already all your own as your creatures, even yours, O Lord, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>40</sup>*

Augustine

## R E A D

> Start by reading Numbers 21:1–10. (We'll read verses 11–20 in just a bit.)

1. What happened the first time the Israelites were at Hormah (14:45)?

## 2. How do verses 4–9 point to Christ?

### HORMAH DEVOTED TO DESTRUCTION

Remember the last time the Israelites left Kadesh? They presumed to enter Canaan when they were specifically told not to, and as a result, they were defeated and pursued until Hormah (14:44–45). But now, we see the opposite happening! Instead of disobeying the Lord, the people have gone to him for help, and he has granted their prayer. (Once again, let us not forget or neglect the power of prayer.) Where disobedience previously led to defeat, obedience leads to victory—a good reminder for us today, even outside the military context.

### THE BRONZE SERPENT

Once again, we see more parallelism between this trip from Kadesh to Hormah and the earlier trip. Just as they did before, the Israelites are taking the route “by the way to the Red Sea” (21:4, 13:25). But just when it seems that the Israelites are making progress—this time praying to the Lord at Hormah instead of disobeying him—they take a step back. They fall into their usual pattern of complaining. And notice, too, that this time they complain directly *against God*. They previously complained about their food “in the hearing of the Lord” (11:1) and at the door of

Moses' tent (11:10), but now they complain directly to God. (Not a great choice. When has this ever gone well for you?) They claim they have no food or water, even though God has miraculously provided both of these every time they have needed them. And what's more, they openly despise his manna, which he has graciously provided for nearly 40 years, as *worthless*!

But God, desiring to turn their hearts back to him and bring them to repentance, graciously imposes his discipline. And this time, he does not use fire or a plague. He has a new trick up his sleeve: fiery serpents (with "fiery" probably referring to the burning pain that was caused by the serpents' poison).

And the serpents do their job. After seeing many people die, the Israelites realize their mistake. Now the man whom they were just complaining against is the one man they are dying to see. They admit their sin and beg for Moses to pray on their behalf. And Moses, without any words of reproach or bitterness, immediately prays for the people.

Just as Moses hears and answers the people, the Lord hears and answers him. He provides instructions—albeit very, um, *unusual* ones—to save the people from the serpents. He tells Moses to create a serpent and set it on a pole. Whoever is bitten and looks at it shall live.

And we are left wondering, *what just happened?* Why on earth does the Lord choose a serpent as the means of healing? And how is this not bordering on idolatry?

Aha, there is the answer though. It is the absurdity of the thing that makes it the right solution. If the Lord had simply removed the serpents or provided some kind of medicine to heal the wounds, the people would have assumed it was a natural remedy. They would have brushed it off as an accident, a strange phenomenon,

the nature of the desert. But instead, in order that “they might perceive themselves to be rescued from death by the mere grace of God alone, a mode of preservation was chosen so discordant with human reason, as to be almost a subject for laughter.”<sup>41</sup> And yet, this subject for laughter also tests their obedience. For who in their right mind could possibly think that looking upon a bronze serpent would provide their cure? And “for what, according to man’s judgment, could a lifeless statue, lifted up on high, profit? But it is the peculiar virtue of faith, that we should willingly be fools, in order that we may learn to be wise only from the mouth of God.”<sup>42</sup>

And beyond its “foolishness,” we see that there is a great paradox in the cure. The serpents are what kill them, and yet it is a serpent which heals them. This is characteristic of the entire sacrificial system; coming in contact with death or blood makes someone unclean, and yet it is death and blood that purifies them. One commentary explains,

This paradox is no more vividly pictured than in the ritual of the red cow (Num 19:1–22), whereby purification is affected for a person made unclean by death through the sprinkling of that which has rendered everyone else impure. So looking with hope for salvation and healing upon a form of that which has rendered one in a position of living or dying was a wondrously paradoxical act of faith in a God who controlled all power over life or death.<sup>43</sup>

Looking at the very thing which caused death is the means that God uses to bring life. Though strange on the surface, there is much to consider underneath. Let’s draw a few conclusions from this story.

1. First, it is only through the serpents that the Israelites realize their sin is a matter of life and death. It is a gracious gift of God



that we should undergo affliction in order to recognize our need for the Savior. Many people spend their entire lives thinking that they have no need for him; and thus they die in ignorance and judgment and sin. Let us be grateful for the pain that draws us near to God, and for the abundant grace that is readily found in him.

2. Second, prayer is also a matter of life and death. It is easy for us to overlook the privilege that God gives us in determining how he will act. Like the Israelites, we are often quick to complain, all the while neglecting the fact that we may go to God at any time and ask him to work in our lives. In fact, we *must* go to God at all times and ask him to work. That is our job as believers. He gives us the privilege, and responsibility, of continually asking him to work in our world. *Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours* (Mk 11:24).
3. Third, we must learn that no one was healed on the basis of their own spiritual merit or achievement. They were impatient, ungrateful, complaining rebels. They rejected God's miraculous gifts, they openly despised him, and they disobeyed him over and over again. They did everything to earn the snake bites and nothing to earn God's healing. But astonishingly enough, God still heals them. This story is a remarkable presentation of the undeserved grace that God offers those who rebel against him. It is a "gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8–9).
4. Lastly, this passage points directly to Christ. Like the Israelites who were bit by the snakes, we too have a fatal verdict awaiting us. All humans do, because all humans have sin and "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). The only possible cure for us is to look to Christ in faith. This is why he said, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son

of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14–15). When we read about Moses raising the bronze serpent to heal the dying, we should instinctively think of Christ being raised to heal sinners.

#### THE JOURNEY THROUGH MOAB

- > Ok, now read Numbers 21:11–20.
  
  - > Then take a look at our map on page 332. Not all of the places mentioned in this passage can be located today, but we have a good idea of where many of them are. Where are the Israelites during this section?
3. What would you say is the mood of the people in verses 10–20?

With the ordeal of the serpents over, the Israelites are ready to move on. And move on they do! With the series of cities and the repeated mention of “setting out,” the pace of the story is suddenly quickened. It seems that the Israelites are finally gaining momentum.

Sprinkled in between the details of their journey, we have two songs about the places through which they are traveling. The blending of these two genres together—travelogue and poetry—conveys “the sense of elation as the goal of their wanderings comes into sight.”<sup>44</sup> What a change this is from the cries of despair in verse 5! Their repentance and obedience is now resulting in great blessing. Not only do they gain a lot of ground, but they do so joyfully.

We should not be thrown off by the mention of a book that we are unfamiliar with. The Book of the Wars of the Lord, lost to us today, was not part of God’s word and is not necessary for us to have. The only difficulty that arises is from the fact that we only have a partial quotation. The words that we have quoted in Scripture (vv. 14–15) are difficult for us to understand today.

The second song is much clearer. The people gather together to celebrate the Lord graciously providing water in the desert. Though the chapter began with complaining and no water, it ends with the opposite. This certainly marks a turning point for the Israelites. Given their long history of complaining about water, their joyful gratitude here is remarkable.

Along with this change in attitude, the most important part of this passage is the fact that they get to Moab. In the last chapter, Edom refused to let Israel pass and they were forced to travel far longer than they hoped. They complain, of course, and end up on the verge of repeating their previous mistakes. But thanks be to God, they repent and they obey him. The fact that they make it to Moab this quickly, without mention of any troubles, is surely a testament of God’s blessing over them. He is faithful to fulfill his promises, and he will deliver them to the promised land.



3. What would you say are your biggest struggles or weaknesses when it comes to prayer?

4. What do you need to change in order to improve on those areas? (Be specific here, and be ready to share with your group on Wednesday.)

## C L O S E

Close today by praying that God would help you make those changes in your prayer life. Ask him to give you an overwhelming sense of his presence with you throughout the day and the unceasing urge to be in constant communication with him. Ask him to open your eyes to see opportunities for prayer around you, and to be diligent in praying over those things.

*O Lord, our Savior, who has warned us that you will require much of those to whom much is given; grant that we whose lot is cast in so goodly a heritage may strive together more abundantly by prayer, by almsgiving, by fasting, and by every other appointed means, to extend to others what we so richly enjoy; and as we have entered into the labors of other men, so to labor that in their turn other men may enter into ours, to the fulfillment of your holy will, and our own everlasting salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Amen.*<sup>45</sup>

Augustine

## WEEK 5 MEMORY VERSE

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).







## VICTORY OVER SIHON

What should be obvious now is the fact that the Israelites' victory over Sihon was previously recorded in Deuteronomy 2:24–37. We have a sort of condensed version here, which should not trouble us. Instead, it should prompt us to ask: why did God choose these specific details?

Take a look at verses 21–31 again. What do you see emphasized?

Let's look at the main points.

- Israel respectfully asks for passage again (21–22).
- Sihon not only refuses but gathers his people to fight Israel (23).
- (No mention of complaining or disobedience.)
- Israel defeats him, takes possession of his land, takes all these cities, and settles in all the cities and in Heshbon and in all its villages (24–25). (Are seeing the emphasis here? Israel completely destroys them and that fact is repeated in several ways.)
- Then *five verses* are spent highlighting the military prowess of the Amorites and their renowned victory of Moab (26–30).
- And just a few quiet words at the end to declare Israel's victory over this great nation (31).

So much of this section is spent describing the military might of the Amorites. Their land once belonged to the Moabites, but they devoured them and took the land for themselves. So infamous was this conquest that ballad singers memorialized it.

And yet this great nation absolutely crumbles before Israel! Though it is not mentioned until verse 34, surely this a work of the Lord. Israel, on their own, could never have accomplished such an overwhelming victory over such a great nation.

## VICTORY OVER OG

And the victory continues. The Israelites spy out Jazer, capture it, and then set their sights on Bashan. When the king of Bashan and all his people come out to fight the Israelites, the Lord tells them not to fear, for he is giving them into their hands. Once again, we have a shortened version of the story (Deut 3:3–11). But what we are meant to focus on in this passage is the fact that the Israelites obey the Lord and he leads them to victory after victory.

These triumphs were the utmost encouragement to a people plagued by sin and failure. They “went down in their history as a perpetual reminder of the Lord’s omnipotence in time of human vulnerability” (Dt 1:4, 2:24–3:11, 4:47–49, 29:7–8; Josh 9:10, 12:1–6; Jdg 11:19–23; Neh 9:22; Pss 135:10–12, 136:19–26).<sup>46</sup> As the first Israelite settlements in the land, these establishments confirmed to the people that the Lord was indeed bringing them into the land of milk and honey. He was giving them victory, and he would continue to do so until the whole nation was established in the promised land.

After nearly 40 years of rebellion, the Israelites are about to receive their promised inheritance.

## A P P L Y

What we see in these victories is the continued faithfulness of God. He is sure to bring about his promises. (*Have we mentioned that yet?*)

1. What victories has God given you in your life? How do you keep track of them to praise God and look back on during difficult times?

2. Are there specific “victories” that you are still waiting for today? Write them down.
  
3. Would you say your prayer over those situations has been fervent and diligent? Or more casual and sporadic?
  
4. How can you incorporate more serious forms of prayer over these situations (like fasting, praying with a partner, etc.)?

## C L O S E

Finish today by praying through Psalm 135.

*Praise the Lord!  
Praise the name of the Lord,  
give praise, O servants of the Lord,  
who stand in the house of the Lord,  
in the courts of the house of our God!  
Praise the Lord, for the Lord is good;*

*sing to his name, for it is pleasant!  
For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself,  
Israel as his own possession.*

*For I know that the Lord is great,  
and that our Lord is above all gods.  
Whatever the Lord pleases, he does,  
in heaven and on earth,  
in the seas and all deeps.*

*He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth,  
who makes lightnings for the rain  
and brings forth the wind from his storehouses.*

*He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
both of man and of beast;  
who in your midst, O Egypt,  
sent signs and wonders  
against Pharaoh and all his servants;  
who struck down many nations  
and killed mighty kings,  
Sihon, king of the Amorites,  
and Og, king of Bashan,  
and all the kingdoms of Canaan,  
and gave their land as a heritage,  
a heritage to his people Israel.*

*Your name, O Lord, endures forever,  
your renown, O Lord, throughout all ages.  
For the Lord will vindicate his people  
and have compassion on his servants.*

*The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
they have eyes, but do not see;*

*they have ears, but do not hear,  
nor is there any breath in their mouths.  
Those who make them become like them,  
so do all who trust in them.*

*O house of Israel, bless the Lord!  
O house of Aaron, bless the Lord!  
O house of Levi, bless the Lord!  
You who fear the Lord, bless the Lord!  
Blessed be the Lord from Zion,  
he who dwells in Jerusalem!  
Praise the Lord!*

WEEK 5 MEMORY VERSE

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Rom 8:28).

WEEK 6  
*numbers 22-25*

## MEMORY VERSE

NUMBERS 23:19

God is not man, that he should lie,  
or a son of man, that he should change his mind.

Has he said, and will he not do it?  
Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?

# DAY 1

## *numbers 22*

### P R E P A R E

You made it to week 6! *Congratulations.* Take a deep breath.

At this point in the study, maybe you feel a little fatigued. Maybe you feel like you are running a marathon. Or maybe you have gotten behind and you are kicking yourself for it. Whatever you are feeling today, take a minute to focus your heart on what matters. Getting through this study means nothing if you are not first seeking God in it. This is not something to check off your to-do list. This is not something to finish just so you can tell your group on Wednesday that you did it. *This is about your relationship with God.* Whatever else is going on, make sure that he comes first—*always.* That might sound ridiculous to say about our prayer and Bible reading, but we know how we can go on autopilot. We do these things because we know we are supposed to, not because we are seeking to grow in our love for God and his word. So start today by *seeking him.*

- > *Pray that God would help you to seek him in everything you do—starting with your prayer and Bible reading.*
- > *Pray that he would fill you with a deep joy and love for his word.*
- > *Pray that he would give you wisdom to understand it and to live differently because of it.*

*Every word of God proves true;  
he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.*

Proverbs 30:5



## R E A D

Today, we arrive at one of the most famous stories in all of Numbers: the oracles of Balaam. In a book that follows the relationship between the Lord and the Israelites as he leads them from Sinai to the promised land, chapters 22–24 take a strange turn. They are now camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho (22:1), and the focus of the story shifts to two non-Israelites. Moses, whose name is mentioned over 230 times in the book, is not mentioned once in these three chapters; instead, our main (human) characters become a Moabite king and a Mesopotamian seer.

The artistry of the narrative is brilliant, filled with rich irony, drama, and paradoxes, while its theological significance is readily evident from the fact that three whole entire chapters are devoted to this exchange. As a reader, we are left with several questions from the story. Why does God choose to speak through a non-Israelite? Is Balaam a hero for the Israelites or simply a pagan? Does God change his mind about Balaam going to Balak (22:12, 35)? What is the purpose of including these chapters in Numbers?

We will discuss these, and plenty of other questions, as we look at the narrative this week.

- > Read Numbers 22. When you are done, let's go over a few basic details.
  1. What is Moab afraid of?

2. How does Balak describe Israel?

3. What does he ask Balaam to do?

#### BALAK HIRES BALAAM

Like we mentioned, the Israelites are now camped in the plains of Moab at Jericho. The very first detail we are told in our story is that Moab is “in great dread of the people” and is “overcome with fear of the people of Israel” (2–3). This statement is key, because it explains why everything in chapters 22–24 takes place. The king of Moab saw how Israel conquered the Amorites and now he is terrified of them—and yet they have already entered his land. Quite a predicament for him.

Notice what he does first: he tries to rile up the Midianites. That’s how scared he is of the Israelites. He knows he needs reinforcements. Then he sends a message to Balaam asking him to curse the Israelites for him, “since they are too mighty” for him, and the elders of Moab and Midian—clearly Midian hopped on the bandwagon—took him the divination fees.

All of this seems good and fine... until we get to verse 8. Balaam tells the elders to wait until the Lord speaks to him. *What? What on earth does a Mesopotamian seer have to do with the Lord of*

*Israel? And how dare he presume that the Lord would speak directly to him?*

As a professional prophet (diviner, seer, etc.), it was his job to know the gods of the area. Perhaps this is how he knew of the Israelite God. Or perhaps the message from Balak was more detailed than what we have in verses 5–6, and he mentioned the Israelite God. Either way, it is Balaam’s job to call upon the Lord, strange as it may seem to us. (And it seems safe to say he has no idea whom he is up against.)

God comes to him—to a *pagan fortune teller, of all people*—and asks him who the men with him are. Of course, this is purely rhetorical, since God already knows. But it serves to start the conversation with Balaam and give him instructions not to go with them men. Specifically, Balaam cannot curse the Israelites—*for they are blessed* (11). God is declaring his protection and blessing over his people (who, let’s not forget, have done nothing to earn it). They are *his*, and he will not allow them to be cursed by a pagan seer.

The fact that Balaam obeys the Lord’s instructions and repeats them faithfully to the messengers has led many to consider Balaam a righteous, God-fearing man. But references to Balaam throughout the rest of the Bible repeatedly condemn him. The fact that God speaks through him simply indicates that God can use anyone (or anything, in the case of the upcoming donkey) to accomplish his purposes.

But then, after Balaam refuses the messengers and Balak sends more men, God gives him different instructions. Now he says that Balaam *can* go with them (20). So why does he change his mind? And why is so angry when Balaam follows his instructions (22)?

Ironically, in the very next chapter, we are told that God does not change his mind (23:19). While this is true, we also know that God responds differently to different situations. We have already talked about that in regard to Moses' prayers for God to be gracious. Remember, God's *unchangeableness* (or *immutability*) means that he is unchanging in his character, but responds differently to different situations. Perhaps this is an instance in which God is responding differently to a different situation (even though we are not given those details). Something may have changed in Balaam's heart, which explains why God tells him he may go now.

In the end, we are not told exactly why here. For now, we have to accept that we are left with the tension. That is what makes this story so captivating! It raises so many questions without answering them—or at least, without answering them right away. Later details in the story may clear up these mysteries, so we will read attentively.

#### THE DONKEY AND THE ANGEL

It is possible that Balaam was still hoping to curse Israel and receive a huge fortune for his success (vv. 17–18), and that is why the Lord became so angry with him. This is exactly what happened in the Israelites when they complained about not having meat. Remember that first rebellion in Numbers? *While the meat was yet between their teeth, before it was consumed, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD struck down the people with a very great plague* (11:33). For them, it was an issue of the heart. They were “the people who had the craving” (11:34). Perhaps it is the same situation here. Certainly the same words are used: God's anger *was kindled*. Of course, we cannot know this for sure, but it does seem to fit well—especially given his spiritual blindness that is about to be revealed.

Up until now, Balaam is shown to be a famous, powerful seer who can summon deities on command. But now his true abilities (or

rather, *inabilities*) are revealed. This man who was supposed to be a great spiritual “seer” could not see the angel of the Lord before him, nor could he see any significance in the actions of his trusted donkey. In reality, this great man is spiritually blind and powerless.

And yet, the irony is that this dumb and mute animal has more perception than he does! She sees the angel and does everything to avoid him. And when she cannot avoid him and lies before him, the Lord opens her mouth to respond to Balaam. She asks why he has struck her, and he replies with one of my favorite answers: “Because you have made a fool of me” (29). *Yes, Balaam. You look like a fool because your donkey turned aside from the road, not because you are currently having a conversation with an animal.*

Then the Lord opens the eyes of Balaam. Whatever he may have claimed as a professional prophet, we know that no one sees or understands the Lord without him first opening their eyes. After all, *the natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned* (1 Cor 2:14). And after Balaam finally understands what has happened, the angel of the Lord repeats the command to only speak the words that he is told (35).

So Balaam continues on. Balak shows his anticipation and impatience as he comes to meet Balaam at the border. He wonders why Balaam did not come earlier, and repeats his offer “to honor” (aka *generously compensate*) Balaam. But Balaam reiterates the fact that he can only speak the words that God puts in his mouth—which says more about the holy inspiration of the upcoming messages than the faith or character of the messenger. God may choose anyone to be his spokesman, regardless of their righteousness.

## A P P L Y

That is one of the great truths about our passage today. God can use anyone. In this instance, he uses a pagan fortune-teller. Heck, he even uses a *donkey*.

And you know what? If God can use a donkey, *he can use you too*.

Ok, don't get me wrong. You are not on par with a donkey. You are *far* more valuable and talented than an animal. But that's exactly the point! *Don't you see that?* If God can use a donkey to accomplish his purposes, how much more so can he use you, with all of your gifts and talents and skills?

Sometimes we feel deeply inadequate. We feel like we don't know enough about God or the Bible. We feel like we aren't mature enough in our faith. We feel like we don't have the necessary skills or training. These feelings are partially valid; we should certainly strive to grow in our knowledge and our faith and our skills.

*But if God can use a donkey to accomplish his purposes, how much more so can he use you?*

1. Think about that for a minute. How is God already using you to carry out his will in different areas?

I think more often than not, our problem has nothing to do with our knowledge of the Bible or the skills we desire. I think it has far more to do with our obedience and our diligence. We often make excuses for why can't do something. In fact, just the other day, I told Randy that I can't take out the trash because I'm not nearly as good at it as he is.

Ok, obviously I was joking with him. But we do this all the time with far more serious matters! *I can't share Christ with my neighbors because I'm not gifted in evangelism. I can't teach the Bible to anyone because I don't know it well enough myself. I can't be a "prayer warrior" because I'm no good at praying.*

But if God can use a donkey, *how much more so can he use you?*

*God can use you to save your family members and your neighbors.*

*God can use you to disciple newer believers.*

*God can use you to keep church ministries running effectively.*

*God can use you to raise godly children who know and love his word.*

*God can use you to pray for others and radically change their lives.*

*God can use you to carry out his will.*

2. There are several examples above, but perhaps you thought of others. In what specific ways is God calling you to be more obedient and diligent so that he can use you to carry out his will?

3. What do you need to do this week in order to make those changes?



## C L O S E

End today by praying that God would use you as an instrument to do his will. Pray that he would open your eyes to see what to do. Pray that he would give you diligence to follow through in doing it.

*THOU GOD OF MY END,*

*Thou hast given me a fixed disposition  
to go forth and spend my life for thee;  
If it be thy will let me proceed in it;  
if not, then revoke my intentions.  
All I want in life is such circumstances  
as may best enable me to serve thee in the world;  
To this end I leave all my concerns in thy hand,  
but let me not be discouraged,  
for this hinders my spiritual fervency;  
Enable me to undertake some task for thee,  
for this refreshes and animates my soul,  
so that I could endure all hardships and labours,  
and willingly suffer for thy name.  
But, O what a death it is to strive and labour,  
to be always in a hurry and yet do nothing!  
Alas, time flies and I am of little use.  
O that I could be a flame of fire in thy service,  
always burning out in one continual blaze.  
Fit me for singular usefulness in this world.  
Fit me to exult in distresses of every kind  
if they but promote the advancement  
of thy kingdom.  
Fit me to quit all hopes of the world's friendship,  
and give me a deeper sense of my sinfulness.  
Fit me to accept as just desert from thee  
any trial that may befall me.  
Fit me to be totally resigned to the denial  
of pleasures I desire,*

*and to be content to spend my time with thee.  
Fit me to pray with a sense of the joy  
of divine communion,  
to find all times happy seasons to my soul,  
to see my own nothingness,  
and wonder that I am allowed to serve thee.  
Fit me to enter the blessed world  
where no unclean thing is,  
and to know thee with me always.<sup>47</sup>*

WEEK 6 MEMORY VERSE

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)



Look closely at Balaam's oracle. It is characteristic of Hebrew poetry, especially in its use of parallelism (which is the repetition of similar words or grammatical structures in consecutive lines). For instance, in the first two lines, "from Aram" corresponds with "from the eastern mountains" and "Balak" is the same as "the king of Moab." In the second and third lines, "come" is obviously repeated, while "curse" corresponds to "denounce" and "Israel" is another name for "Jacob." (Make sense?)

3. What other parallel words or phrases do you see in the rest of the oracle? (It's easiest to mark them in your Bible, but you can always write them below instead.)

4. What is the significance of 23:10 in light of Genesis 13:16?

## THE FIRST ORACLE

Our passage today begins the morning after Balaam arrived to meet Balak. Balaam instructs him to build seven altars, upon each of which they sacrifice a ram and a bull. This sounds very similar to the Israelite sacrificial system (except for the multiple altars), a strange thing for non-Israelites to be practicing, but there is a record of Babylonians building seven altars and sacrificing seven sheep upon them. Unbeknownst to them, though, seven was a sacred number to the Israelites. It represented fullness, completeness, purity. Even in their sacrifices, they are unwittingly subservient to the Lord.

Then Balaam leaves to meet God, and surprisingly, God once again meets this pagan. But make no mistake—God did not show up and speak to Balaam his sacrifice was somehow pleasing; God spoke to Balaam purely because he was carrying out his purposes through him. And God’s message for Balak was quite a shocker. Remember, Balaam never repeated God’s original message that he is forbidden from cursing Israel because they are blessed. The only thing Balaam tells them is that the Lord will not let him go. So when Balaam later says he can go, Balak would have surely seen it as a sign that Balaam changed his mind and decided to curse the Israelites. It was a rude awakening for Balak when Balaam finally delivered his oracle.

In his message, he reveals that the Lord is the one who protects the Israelites. They are *his* people, “a people dwelling alone” and not counted among the other nations. It is because God has chosen them as his that he cannot curse them or denounce them. After all, they are clearly a great nation. They can be seen the top of the crags and from the hills. They are as numerous as the dust of the earth, just as the Lord promised they would be—*I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted* (Gen 13:16).

Needless to say, Balak *does not* take the news well. But Balaam repeats the fact that he can only say what the Lord tells him to say. Let's not forget, this does not speak to his character; he is not some faithful, righteous man. We know this because Scripture repeatedly condemns him (31:8–16, Dt 23:4–5, 2 Pet 2:15, Jude 11, Rev 2:14). Instead, we should see Balaam as an instrument in the hands of God. He may carry out his will through any means he chooses, which in this instance, happens to be a pagan prophet.

What matters is the message that God communicates through him. In this first oracle, God declares that Israel is his protected nation. He has blessed them to become as numerous as the dust on the earth, and no one may curse them. As a people entering occupied lands, this is a warning to other nations: *do not mess with Israel*. But it is also the most extraordinary encouragement to Israel itself. *Even pagans, who despise the Lord, cannot help but declare the greatness of his people*. As they begin to enter the promised land, Balaam's oracles stand as a guarantee, not just to Israel but to all the nations, that the Lord will bless and protect his people.

## THE SECOND ORACLE

> Now read 23:13–26.

5. What parallelism do you see in this oracle?

6. What are the main points that God communicates through Balaam in this message?

When Balaam fails to curse the Israelites in the first oracle, Balak takes him again to another location. The situation repeats itself almost exactly as it did the first time. Balak builds seven altars, they offer the bulls and rams, Balaam leaves to meet the Lord, the Lord tells him to return to Balak with the message, and Balaam returns.

Like the first oracle, the second message begins by correcting Balak's wrong views about God. Balak thinks he can simply try again and God may change his mind, but he is mistaken. God does not lie, nor does he change his mind. Men do these things, but God is not man. God does everything he says he will do. He fulfills everything he has spoken.

And not only will Balaam not curse Israel, as he has said before, but now he has been commanded to *bless* Israel! No misfortune or trouble will come upon them, for *the Lord their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them*. And beyond that he said in the first message, the Israelites are not simply blessed; they have the very presence of their God among them. He is the God who led them out of Egypt and who fights for them like the horns of a wild ox. Nothing can stand against them—no enchantment, no divination, no curse. And now, the time has come that Israel will devour her enemies as a lion. The point is clear for Balak: he stands no chance.

The reality seems to hit him as Balak suddenly withdraws his previously adamant request. If Balaam is now going to bless them, Balak is no longer worried about cursing them. He would settle for Balaam simply not blessing them. But this momentary taste of reality is fleeting. As soon as Balaam responds that he cannot do anything other than what the Lord says, he snaps back into his curse-hungry self. Perhaps if he tries one more time, then the Lord will change his mind.

## A P P L Y

In this second oracle, God teaches us some significant truths. And that is why it is our memory verse for this week! Verse 19 says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” There are two related doctrines that we should take away from this verse: (1) God never lies, and (2) he never changes. Let’s talk about each of these.

First, God never lies, and this has huge implications for our lives. It means we can always trust him to keep his word, and we never have to worry if he will do what he says he will do. Beyond that, we are also called to imitate God. Ephesians 5:1 says, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.” So if we are called to imitate God and God never lies, then we also must never lie. The Bible commands this repeatedly. Ephesians 4:25 says, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.” Similarly, Colossians 3:9, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices.”

1. In what ways do you tell “little white lies” because you don’t think they hurt anyone?





perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.”<sup>48</sup> This should bring us great comfort because we know that God will never change his mind. He will never change his mind about our salvation, he will never change his mind about his love toward us, he will never change his mind about working all things for our good. Because God never changes, we have great peace.

5. Write down as many promises of Scripture as you can think of. (If you need some help getting started, take a look at John 16:33, Ps 32:8, Ps 37:23–24, Matt 11:28–29, 2 Cor 12:9–10, Phil 4:7.)

6. Which of these did you need to be reminded of most today?  
Why?

7. How can you actively remind yourself of that truth this week?

## C L O S E

Close today by praising God for his unchanging character. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Pray that he would help you to see his unchangeableness throughout the day.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father  
There is no shadow of turning with thee  
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not  
As thou hast been, thou forever will be

Great is thy faithfulness  
Great is thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest  
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above  
Join with all nature in manifold witness  
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love

Great is thy faithfulness  
Great is thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth  
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide  
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow  
Blessings all mine with ten thousand beside

Great is thy faithfulness  
Great is thy faithfulness  
Morning by morning new mercies I see  
All I have needed thy hand hath provided

Great is thy faithfulness  
Great is thy faithfulness  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me

#### WEEK 6 MEMORY VERSE

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)

# DAY 3

*numbers 24*

## P R E P A R E

What's on your heart today? Take a moment to tell God. Give him all your worries and all your heartaches.

Then ask him to help you focus your mind on him. Ask him to help you understand his word and grow in your love for it.

*The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul.*

Psalm 19:7

## R E A D

> Just like yesterday, let's read one oracle at a time. Start by reading Numbers 23:27–24:14.

1. Yesterday we talked about parallelism in Hebrew poetry. Consecutive lines generally repeat synonyms (like “tents” and “encampments” in verse 5) or similar grammatical structures (like “Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you” in verse 9). What other examples of parallelism do you see throughout the third oracle? (Again, it's probably easier to mark it in your Bible, but feel free to write it down below.)

2. What blessings (material, spiritual, military, etc.) does God promise for Israel here?

## THE THIRD ORACLE

Balak still has not grasped the fact that moving locations will not change God's mind; he is not a God who is bound or limited or influenced by geography. But he tries anyway.

Not surprisingly, this section begins with another seven altars and another round of sacrifices. But this time, Balaam does not leave "to look for omens"—a detail which reveals his abominable pagan practices (Dt 18:10). Instead, the Spirit of God comes upon him and he speaks God's words right there.

This oracle, like the others before it, reveals significant theological truths. First, the "loveliness" of Israel's tents once again communicates that God has chosen them and blessed them. Second, God will provide all of their physical needs. They will have plenty of land to "stretch afar." They will be as fertile as gardens beside a river or aloes that the Lord plants himself. They will be as strong and established as the unparalleled cedar tree. They will have water flowing freely, even in the arid climate. Third, they have spiritual confidence, knowing that their God has delivered them from slavery and fights for them like the horns of the wild ox. Fourth, they have military success. They will "eat up the nations" and pierce them with their arrows. And fifth, God repeats—and *fulfills*—the promise he made to Abraham hundreds of years earlier: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). This has been the whole point of the oracles. *Israel is blessed by God, and nothing will change that.* Even the most prominent diviner of the day is powerless to curse them! In fact, he is merely a pawn in the hands of the almighty God, who accomplishes his purposes regardless of those who think they can thwart it.

Balak responds in furious derision. He called Balaam to curse Israel, but Balaam has gone and blessed them *three times*! Now Balak, as if he has ever been in control of the situation, tries to send Balaam

packing—without any payment for the failed services, of course. But in another twist of irony, Balaam surprises Balak by announcing that he has yet another oracle coming. Isn't that funny? When Balak originally called Balaam, he did not come. And now that Balak is trying to get rid of Balaam, he will not go. Every detail of this story reveals Balak's powerlessness against God. No one can manipulate God; he will have the final word.

#### THE FINAL ORACLES

> Now finish the chapter by reading verses 15–25.

1. In what ways are these oracle different from the first three?

2. Who is the star of Jacob, the scepter of Israel?



### 3. How did Edom (18) treat the Israelites previously in Numbers?

In this passage, Balaam gives four final oracles. He begins with one general one, just like the previous oracles, before giving three specific messages to Amalek, the Kenite, and Assyria. All of them continue the theme that Israel will conquer the surrounding nations, but this time, they come at the prompting of the Lord, not Balak, and there are no altars or sacrifices.

The fourth oracle (15–19) begins almost identically to the third oracle, other than the addition that he “knows the knowledge of the Most High.” God has progressively revealed more to Balaam with every message, and this time is no exception. What is unique about this oracle, however, is that it looks to the distant future, not just the near future. In verse 17 he says, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near.” In other words, Balaam indicates a large gap of time between the oracle and its fulfillment. At some time in the distant future, “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” The scepter undoubtedly refers to a king, while the reference to a star is less clear. But Isaiah 14:12 refers to the king of Babylon as the “Day Star,” which at least suggests that stars may have been metaphors for kings. It is this king who will “crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.” We do not know exactly who the “Sheth” were, but the parallelism in the passage suggests that it was a synonym for Moab (just as Jacob is synonymous with Israel in the previous lines).

In one sense, David fulfilled these prophecies. He became the king of Israel and defeated the Moabites (2 Sam 8:2). But Israel’s defeat

of Moab (and Edom) was only temporary. When Israel was weak these nations would attack back, which certainly does not fit the description of destroying “the survivors of the cities” (19). That is why many later prophets contain further oracles against them (Amos 1:11–12, 2:1–3; Isa 15–16; Jer 48), and sometimes even quote the prophecies of Balaam directly. The fact that later writers keep issuing and reusing these prophecies “shows that they realized that they had been only partially fulfilled.”<sup>49</sup>

So while David may have fulfilled Balaam’s prophecies in the primary sense, the Israelites still awaited a king who would vanquish their enemies once and for all. And that further fulfillment comes in Christ. He is both the star and the king. That is why the wise men said, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Mt 2:2). This is the Son of David who has defeated sin and death and will one day vanquish all enemies.

The final three oracles (20–24) each begin with the standard introduction that Balaam “took up his discourse and said.” The first verse (20) and the last verse (24) in the series both end with “utter destruction,” forming bookends (or what we like to call an *inclusio*) around the unit. And that is exactly the main theme of these oracles—*utter destruction*. The theme that began in the second oracle grew in every message until God made it clear that he will wipe out every enemy from before his people.

And on that note, Balaam rose up and went back to his home. And Balak did the same. A strangely anticlimactic ending to such a long narrative, isn’t it? Their silence in the text almost indicates a tacit acceptance of the messages—or better yet, an indication that they fell on deaf ears. The lack of any reaction from the two men causes us to focus on the message itself, for that is the true main character in all of this. The men were merely carrying out the will

of the Lord; what matters are the messages he communicated through them.

And the Lord communicated two central truths in these chapters: Israel is blessed by him, and he will give them victory over their enemies.

## A P P L Y

Balaam's oracles contain God's words about Israel as they begin to enter the promised land. They were given at a specific time, in a specific situation, to specific people. But even so, they teach us much about our lives today because they teach us about our God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

1. What do the third and fourth oracles reveal about God? Look at the verses and write down as many things as you can find.

One commentary remarks: “The extraordinary means through which the heathen prophet is led to make these predictions is a sign of their divine origin and a guarantee of their ultimate fulfillment. The people should, therefore, take courage despite the daunting prospect of the struggles ahead of them.”<sup>50</sup>

2. How can these truths about God which you just identified also give you courage despite the struggles which lie ahead of you?

3. If God can use a heathen prophet to carry out his will, how should that influence the way that you view the evil in your life?

## C L O S E

Now that we have finished the oracles of Balaam, take a minute to write down why they are important and what truth you will meditate on. Feel free to think of all the oracles as a whole or just focus on the ones we read today.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”*

1 Corinthians 15:24–27

## WEEK 6 MEMORY VERSE

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)



# DAY 4

## *numbers 25*

### P R E P A R E

Is there any sin in your life that you need to confess before you begin today? Take a moment to confess to God, and to praise him for his forgiveness.

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

1 John 1:8–9

### R E A D

Today we have a short chapter, but a good one. I mean, honestly, whoever said Numbers is boring must not enjoy stabbings, plagues, or whoring with pagans. What's not to like there? Ok, ok. Not the most *palatable* chapter. But definitely a fascinating one. Let's hop in.

> Read Numbers 25.

1. Jump ahead to 31:16. Who caused the Israelites to get caught up in Baal worship?

2. Where does the plague come from?

3. How would you define God's jealousy? And his wrath?

4. In what ways does Phinehas reflect Christ?



## BAAL WORSHIP

What an interesting chapter we have. At first, it may seem unrelated to the Balaam narrative that came before it. But as always, there is more beneath the surface. When we read 31:16, we are told that Balaam was the one who “caused the people to act treacherously” here. Specifically, they “began to whore with the daughters of Moab.” (If that wasn’t warning enough, let me make this very clear: *this chapter is not PG.*) To “whore” with them literally refers to religious fornication. The men of Israel not only joined the Moabites in making sacrifices to Baal and bowing down to him, but they were having sex with the Moabite women—perhaps married women, but likely temple prostitutes. After all, Baal was the Canaanite god of fertility. This is his first mention in the Bible, though he is about to become the primary competitor for the hearts of the Israelites as they enter Canaan. And here, on their first encounter, they yoke themselves with him and reject God. They violated the commandment not to have other gods before him and not to commit adultery (Ex 20:3, 14). Breaking any of the ten commandments was grounds for death, and here the Israelites have broken two of them.

So the Lord commands the chiefs to be put to death. This is fitting since they were not only representatives of the people, but they were also responsible for restraining their people from turning to Baal. And on hearing the judgment from the Lord, the people gathered together and wept at the entrance of the tent of meeting. In the midst of this public remorse, one man—the son of a chief no less (14)—brought a Midianite woman to his family in the sight of the entire congregation. You can almost feel the heads turning as the brazen man walks past in full violation of the covenant. It is bad enough that the Israelites have left camp to unite themselves with the pagans; now this man is bringing a pagan into the encampment of the Lord’s holy people.

So Phinehas stands up with his spear and goes after the man. Remember how I said this chapter is not PG? Well, it is about to get worse. Phinehas enters the couple's "chamber"—a word that is only used here but seems to indicate the place where the couple was having intercourse. Phinehas takes his spear and pierces both of them, which again seems to indicate they were positioned for intercourse. Though the man was simply pierced, the woman was specifically pierced *through her belly*. After all, she had led him astray with her body, so it is appropriate that "she is pierced through the organ of his downfall."<sup>51</sup> And with their death, the plague on the people of Israel was stopped.

*What? What plague??*

Apparently the Israelites' whoring, which had kindled the anger of the Lord, led to a widespread plague. Though 24,000 had already died, Phinehas' actions had undoubtedly saved the lives of countless more. Some consider those 24,000 to include the remainder of the older generation who were condemned to die in the wilderness, since the census in the subsequent chapter indicates that all of that generation had now died (26:64–65).

This passage immediately reminds us of Aaron's actions when he took fire from the altar and offered incense to stop the plague after Korah's rebellion (16:47–48). In the same way, Phinehas took his spear and made atonement for the sins of the people. As a priest, Phinehas was a spiritual protector of the people. He is charged with making atonement for the people. Normally, that would mean sacrificing an animal in place of the guilty person, but here the sinners themselves are put to death.

And God commends him for it. He says that Phinehas has turned back his wrath from the people of Israel, so that he did not consume the people of Israel in his jealousy—which brings up the question of God's wrath and jealousy. How should we view these

characteristics? Certainly human wrath and jealousy are far from righteous, so how can we say that God possesses them?

Well, as we can see from this passage, God's wrath means that he intensely hates all sin,<sup>52</sup> while his jealousy means that he "continually seeks to protect his own honor."<sup>53</sup> Both of these are attributes of God, and as such, we must imitate them in our own lives. Certainly Phinehas did as he put an end to the sin of the couple. In hating sin, he loved and protected the people.

#### HARASS THE MIDIANITES

Our chapter ends with a command from the Lord to harass the Midianites and strike them down, specifically because of their role in causing the Israelites to abandon the Lord. These instructions serve as a precursor to the Lord's commands in 33:50–56 to drive out the inhabitants of Canaan. They will not be given the chance to lead Israel astray again.

#### A P P L Y

The intensity with which Phinehas goes after sin in this passage probably makes most of us blush (and not just because of the adult references). We so often treat sin with the opposite attitude. Maybe if we just stay quiet, it will see itself out, right? *Not quite*. If we are to honor God in our lives, we must intensely hate sin and actively rid ourselves of it.

Take a few minutes to reflect on your own attitude toward sin.

5. Would you say that you imitate God by intensely hating all sin? Why?



8. What sin do you need to put an end to in your marriage? In your parenting? In your friendships? In yourself?

## C L O S E

Finish today with our usual notes, before praying that God would continue to make you more free from sin and more like Christ.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.*

1 Corinthians 10:13

## WEEK 6 MEMORY VERSE

God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it? (Num 23:19)

WEEK 7  
*numbers 26-36*

## MEMORY VERSE

JOSHUA 1:8

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.



# DAY 1

*numbers 26-27*

## P R E P A R E

Prepare your heart today by praising Christ for his sacrifice that turned away the wrath of God. Ask him to teach you through his word, and to continually develop in you a deep hatred for sin.

*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.*

Romans 5:9–10

## R E A D

Week 7! You made it! Congratulations. (Never thought this day would come, did you?) You should be proud of your diligence and discipline throughout this study. *Well done, good and faithful servant.*

This final week is going to be a little different. We have discussed several important features of Numbers, and now is the time to put them into practice as we finish the last few chapters. Think through some of the principles we have mentioned:

- The people are on the verge of inheriting the promised land, and the Lord is giving them all the necessary instructions before they conquer Canaan.
- Narrative and law are intertwined throughout Numbers; they are often placed side by side to help explain each other. (Even when a passage seem completely unrelated, there is a reason why it is specifically placed there.)



3. In what ways does this census show God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises?

#### THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD

4. Why is their request so timely? (Think back to 26:55–56.)

5. What does God's response teach us about him?

## JOSHUA AS SUCCESSOR

6. In what ways is God shown to be faithful in this passage?

### A P P L Y

My favorite part of these chapters might be 27:5, for two reasons. First of all, we see another instance of the Lord responding to his people. He could have easily given these instructions beforehand, but he waits for his people to come to him for guidance. It is a beautiful illustration of the truth that *God wants us to come to him with our questions and our problems. He desires us to communicate with him, and he delights to answer our prayer.*

But second, the people go to Moses with their dilemma, and Moses immediately goes to the Lord. What a wonderful example for us to follow today! How often do we look to other people or books or resources before we go to the Lord? How often do we listen to the problems of our friends or our husbands without ever saying, “What does God’s word have to say about this?” Or, “Why don’t we pray about this right now?” How often do we tell

ourselves or other people that we will pray for something, when we could stop right there and pray in the moment?

Moses' example reminds us that we should turn to the Lord first—in both prayer and reading his word—before anything else.

1. In what circumstances do you tend to be slow in turning to the Lord?

2. What habits can you develop that will help you turn to him right away?

3. How will you direct your thoughts to the Lord as you go throughout your day?

## C L O S E

Close today by writing down all the characteristics of God that you saw in these two chapters. Then praise God for them, and meditate on them throughout the day. And of course, don't forget to review our memory verse.

*I will meditate on your precepts  
and fix my eyes on your ways.*

Psalm 119:15

## WEEK 7 MEMORY VERSE

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh 1:8).

# DAY 2

*numbers 28-29*

## PREPARE

Before you start reading today, take time to focus your heart on God.

*O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Psalm 51:15–17

## READ

Today's chapters are about instructions for offerings. I know, I'm excited too. But what do we know about God's word? All of it is important! And all of it has something to teach us.

> Read Numbers 28–29.

1. Thinking about where we are at in the story of the Israelites, why are these offering instructions placed here?



2. How often are each of the sacrifices offered?

28:1–8:

28:9–10:

28:11–15:

28:16–29:40:

3. What does it say about God that he requires the people to take an entire week off work and have a feast? How should this lead us to greater gratefulness and enjoyment of God's material blessings?

4. What does it say about sin that sacrifices must be made every day?

5. How does this sacrificial system point to Christ?

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR OFFERINGS

As we saw, these chapters give instructions for offerings, beginning with daily sacrifices and moving to weekly, monthly, and annual sacrifices. Many of the sacrificial instructions that we have seen in Numbers so far have come up as they were needed, but these chapters are totally different. These instructions do not arise from a specific dilemma, but because the Israelites are about to enter the promised land and would be in a position to carry out these sacrifices year after year. In anticipation of that, these chapters offer a comprehensive calendar of the sacrificial system. Similar lists are found elsewhere in Scripture, but as you may have noticed, these chapters focus specifically on the responsibilities of the priests.

Most importantly, every Old Testament sacrifice points to Christ. The priests offered sacrifices every day, but Christ offered himself once and for all. This is why Hebrews 10:11–14 says,

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Christ is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). At his death, the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was made obsolete. In fact, temple sacrifices stopped completely 40 years later when the temple was destroyed in AD 70.

## A P P L Y

With the sacrificial system obsolete, these chapters should cause us to ask ourselves, *what kind of sacrifices should we make today?*



With your husband?

With your friends?

With your neighbors or coworkers?

## C L O S E

Finish today with our usual notes. Feel free to pick a specific section of our reading today.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

Hebrews 13:15–16

## WEEK 7 MEMORY VERSE

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh 1:8).



# DAY 3

*numbers 30-31*

## P R E P A R E

*With my whole heart I seek you;  
let me not wander from your commandments!  
I have stored up your word in my heart,  
that I might not sin against you.  
Blessed are you, O Lord;  
teach me your statutes!*

Psalm 119:10–12

## R E A D

- > Read Numbers 30–31. As you read chapter 31, make note of every time you see the phrase “as the Lord commanded Moses.”

1. Why do you think the chapter on vows is placed right here?





## INSTRUCTIONS ON VOWS

The vows for women here provide a parallel to the instructions on Nazarite vows in 6:1–21. There are not any explicit reasons why this section is placed here, but we have several clues. Think back over the last few chapters. Chapter 27 dealt with the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad, while chapters 28–29 gave instructions for offerings—with one of the last verses mentioning vow offerings (29:39). Generally, vows would be sealed with a sacrifice, and when the prayer was answered, another sacrifice would be made. So these previous chapters introduce both of the themes we see here.

The primary focus of this chapter is the seriousness of the vow's bind on the person making it. We can see this in the structure of the passage, which is made of two groups of three cases:

<b>Verses</b>	<b>Material</b>	<b>Verses</b>	<b>Material</b>
2	Men's vows unbreakable	9	Widow's and divorcees' vows unbreakable
3–5	Girls' vows voidable by father	10–12	Wives' vows voidable by husband w/o penalty
6–8	Girls' vows voidable by fiancé'	13–15	Wives' vows voidable w/penalty <sup>54</sup>

When it comes to men, the vows are unbreakable. As Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools.” When it comes to women, it is the duty of the woman to submit to her father or her husband—except in the case of an autonomous woman who is divorced or widowed. Because the vows were so binding, a woman could not make a vow that could potentially become unfulfilled. That is why a father or a husband would give their (silent) approval for it.

What we should see in this chapter is the value and protection that is placed on women. First of all, the fact that they are addressed personally—and with such specific situations! —speaks to their importance. They are not precluded from making vows or passed over in the instructions. No, they are given full attention, and their vows are considered just as significant and binding as those of men. Second, it is the responsibility of the father or husband to speak up if the vow is inappropriate. If a woman were to make a vow without him objecting, and he should object later, the husband would bear the iniquity and would be required to make atonement.

Just as we see in the New Testament, this chapter affirms the value and importance of women, alongside the responsibility of men to lead and protect their families.

#### VENGEANCE ON THE MIDIANITES

And now, after the brief hiatus of the last few chapters, we pick up where the end of chapter 25 left off. The Lord had commanded Moses, “Harass the Midianites and strike them down, for they have harassed you with their wives, with which they beguiled you in the matter of Peor, and in the matter of Cozbi, the daughter of the chief of Midian, their sister, who was killed on the day of the plague on account of Peor” (25:17–18). Now is the time for Israel to carry out justice against the Midianites. It will be Moses’ last military act before he is “gathered to his people.”

Let’s look at this chapter piece by piece.

#### THE BATTLE

The most important detail about this battle comes in the very first verses: the Lord is the one who has commanded it. In other words, it is a holy war. That is why Moses refers to it as “the *Lord’s* vengeance on Midian” (3) and why they are described as warring “as the Lord commanded Moses” (7). That is also why Phinehas the

priest is present along with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for battle (10:9). The high priest was required to stay behind to avoid contact with the dead (Lev 21:11), but the son of the high priest was the next best thing.

And notice how little time is spent on the war itself. We have a meager two verses (7–8), while the rest of the chapter describes what happens after the battle. That should show us what is important here. Our focus is on the Israelites and their holiness, not on the fighting.

But having said that, the few details we do have on the battle are disturbing. All the men are killed, which is not that surprising, but what is surprising is the killing of women and boys. What are we supposed to make of this? How do we deal with the Lord commanding so much death?

We should start by remembering that the Israelites have been on the verge of extinction several times (Ex 32:10; Nu 11, 14:12). It is only because Moses has interceded for them that the Lord turned away his wrath from them and spared their lives. They have rebelled against God time and time again, and they have suffered greatly for it. How many different plagues have we seen so far? How many times has fire come out from the Lord and consumed people? The entire older generation was sentenced to die in the wilderness because of their disobedience. Aaron and Moses were sentenced to die without entering the promised land because of their disobedience. Heck, everyone would have died if it were not for the grace of the Lord. The priests were expected to kill anyone who came near the tabernacle without authorization (3:10, 38)—and they did, like we saw with Phinehas (25:7–8) or Nadab and Abihu (26:61). There is a price to pay for sin, and the price is death.

The Israelites were the first to be punished for their sins, and now it is time for the Midianites. If we read this chapter in shock and

disbelief, we have to remind ourselves that this war was about holiness. The Midianites were guilty of adultery and idolatry—and leading the Israelites into adultery and idolatry as well—and their punishment was death. The Lord is not out to seek retaliation against them; he is carrying out justice for their sin. Just as he did with the Israelites, now he does with the Midianites; he is not partial in his justice. The difference is that the Midianites do not have an intercessor to plead for them before God. (I guess it's kind of important to have a personal mediator between yourself and God.)

#### THE PURIFICATION

Even though this was a holy war commanded by God and carried out with the presence of a priest, those who participated in it were still made unclean through their contact with the dead. Like we read about in 19:11–22 (how convenient), everyone and everything involved in the war must be purified.

Any loss of life, even if commanded by the Lord, was defiling and required purification. The instructions for purification here remind the Israelites that “the death of one’s fellow men was a catastrophic disruption of God’s creation, even though in some cases it was the Creator himself who demanded the execution of the sinner.”<sup>55</sup>

#### THE SPOIL

Then the Lord instructed Moses to divide the spoil among the warriors and the rest of the congregation. Like we saw with the instructions in chapter 18, he sets aside portions of it for the priests and the Levites.

When the spoil is divided, we are also told that not a single Israelite was killed. Think about these numbers here for a minute. There were 16,000 virgin girls (v. 46) left after the war; that means there were must have been thousands more men who were of



3. In what ways is God protecting and blessing you right now?

4. How can the Israelites' victory encourage you and strengthen your faith today?

## C L O S E

Before you end today, write down a few notes about what we read. Feel free to focus on either of the chapters.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

Praise God for his protection and blessing. Pray that he would help you focus on him and him alone. Continue that praise and that focus on him by singing “Be Thou My Vision” today.

*Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart  
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night  
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light*

*Be Thou my wisdom, and Thou my true word  
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord  
Thou my great Father, and I Thy true son  
Thou in me dwelling and I with Thee one*

*Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise  
Thou mine inheritance, now and always*



*Thou and Thou only first in my heart  
High King of heaven, my treasure Thou art  
High King of heaven, my victory won*

*May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall  
Still be my vision, O ruler of all  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall  
Still be my vision, O ruler of all*

#### WEEK 7 MEMORY VERSE

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh 1:8).

# DAY 4

*numbers 32-33*

## P R E P A R E

The passage we have in hand is one that is hard to understand and seems unnecessary to read. But we cannot say of the Holy Spirit's writings that there is anything useless or unnecessary in them, however much they appear obscure to some. What we ought rather to do is to turn the eyes of our mind toward him who ordered this to be written and to ask of him their meaning. We must do this so that if there is weakness in our soul, he who heals all its infirmities (Ps 103:3) may heal us, or so that if we are children in understanding, the Lord may be with us guarding his children and may nourish us and add to the measure of our age (Eph 4:13). For it is in our power to be able to attain both health from weakness and manhood from childhood. It is, then, our part to ask this of God. And it is God's to give to those who ask and to open to those who know (Mt 7:7).<sup>56</sup>

Origen, 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD

Origen wrote these words about Numbers 33 some 1800 years ago, and they are just as relevant today. Begin your devotional time today by praying that God would help you turn the eyes of your mind toward him. Pray that he would help you understand the meaning of his word, and through it, nourish you and add to the measure of your age.

## R E A D

- > Let's read our chapters in stages today. Start with Numbers 32.

1. Why was Gad and Reuben's request (32:4–5) so alarming?

#### REUBEN AND GAD IN GILEAD

We are nearing the end of our book. The Israelites just defeated the Midianites, which was Moses' last military conquest before he should die. And now with that complete, we anticipate his death and the Israelites' arrival in the promised land any time now.

But now the tribes of Reuben and Gad want to disrupt that. They do not want to enter the promised land; they want to stay right where they are. And immediately we have flashbacks of the Israelites' paralyzing fear when the spies returned with their report. The people refused to enter the promised land, and though God spared their lives, they were wandered the desert for 40 years until the older generation died. Are they now going to repeat the exact same scenario?

Moses is understandably furious. Their request triggers an extensive rehashing of Israel's rebellion, reminding them of the previous generation's disobedience and consequences. And now, this new generation is following in their footsteps! They risk turning away from the Lord, and destroying the entire nation in doing so.

But after hearing Moses' objections, the people modify their request. They promise to still enter the promised land and fight alongside the Israelites until it is conquered. Only after the other tribes are settled will they return to Gilead. Moses agrees, and sternly reminds them that their sin will find them out if they disobey.

Then Moses relays the agreement to Eleazar and Joshua. With his own death imminent, he must inform the leaders who would be in charge of overseeing Reuben and Gad's obedience. After the people of Reuben and Gad agree again, Moses gives them, and part of the tribe of Manasseh, the kingdoms the Israelites had conquered at the end of chapter 21 (Sihon and Og).

Obviously, our passage here does not indicate whether the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh kept their promise. For that, we will have to turn to the book of Joshua.

2. Read Joshua 22:1–6. With this in mind, do you think their request was an appropriate plea before a gracious God? Or do you think they were premature and greedy, not trusting that the promised land would be the ultimate blessing?

## RECOLLECTIONS OF THE JOURNEY

- > Now read Numbers 33. This chapter is a record of the route that the Israelites took from Egypt until now. As you read it, you will see several places that we have already read about in Numbers. When you see them, flip back to where we read about them and mark the reference in your Bible throughout chapter 33. (For instance, the first reference in Numbers would be Sinai, which is where our book begins, so write down “1:1–10:12” next to 33:15.)

3. What have been the main themes of Numbers?

4. How are these themes represented in chapter 33?

5. Why is the placement right here, in light of the chapters before and after it, particularly relevant?

With Moses' impending death, this chapter serves as a fitting tribute to his leadership from Egypt to the promised land. But even more than that, it summarizes the main theme of the book of Numbers: *God has been faithful at every point in their journey.*

Moses begins this recollection when the Israelites left Egypt. The current Israelites would have been very young, if they had even been born yet, when “the people of Israel went out triumphantly in the sight of all the Egyptians” (3). They may be familiar with the more recent miracles, but they needed to be reminded of the long history of God's great works—especially given the Lord's command in 33:50–56 to take possession of the promised land. If God had been faithful to protect and guide the Israelites through slavery and the wilderness, he will surely be faithful to protect and guide the Israelites as they conquer Canaan.

Surely there is no more appropriate prelude for the command to enter the land than recalling their sacred history. This last look back gives them fortitude they will need to march on in faith.

## A P P L Y

The best way to respond to chapter 33 is simply to repeat its example. If you were to recount God's faithfulness throughout your life, what would it look like?

1. How was God faithful to you in the last day? Week? Month?

2. Now let's make a new list. Think about the coming week, month, year(s). What things give you the most fear about the future?

Next week

Next month(s)

Next year(s)



3. How can you develop the habit of recalling God's faithfulness in order to trust him more fully when it comes to the uncertainties of the future?

## C L O S E

Finish today by jotting down some notes about any part of our passage, then pray through "How Firm a Foundation" and listen to it as you go through your day.

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word  
What more can He say than to you He has said  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

*Fear not, I am with you, O be not dismayed  
For I am Thy God, and will still give you aid  
I'll strengthen you, help you, and cause you to stand  
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand*

*When through the deep waters I call you to go  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow  
For I will be with you, your troubles to bless  
And sanctify to you your deepest distress*

*When through fiery trials your pathway shall lie  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be your supply  
The flame shall not hurt you, I only design  
Your dross to consume and the gold to refine*

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose  
I will not, I will not desert to His foes  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake*

#### WEEK 7 MEMORY VERSE

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh 1:8).

# DAY 5

*numbers 34-36*

## P R E P A R E

*But he answered, "It is written,  
'Man shall not live by bread alone,  
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"*

Matthew 4:4

## R E A D

> Today, read Numbers 34–36.

1. With the Israelites poised to enter the promised land, the Lord addresses six final laws related to its possession. Write out what those six general laws are:

33:50–56:

34:1–15:

34:16–29:

35:1–8:

35:9–34:

36:1–12:



## BOUNDARIES OF THE PROMISED LAND

By clearly delineating each tribe's land, God leaves nothing to chance. It is a fair distribution of land, based on each tribe's size, with no one left behind. Every tribe is given their due, and together they make up the promised land.

The territory that God is giving the Israelites is vast. It is larger than any area that Israel would ever fully conquer, and as such, it reveals the ideal hope for the nation. God promised to give them the whole territory if they obeyed, but they did not drive out all the inhabitants as they were commanded.

It is a clear testament to the fact that God promises to us are far better than we could ever imagine. Nothing is beyond his power; the question is only whether we will obey.

## TRIBAL CHIEFS

Though it might seem like an ordinary task on the surface, the importance of having leaders to divide the land is shown in their direct appointment by God. This would not turn into a bitter, grumbling affair; God would keep the peace and unity among his tribes. The ten tribal leaders (excluding Reuben and Gad, who already received their portion) would ensure that God's plan was carried out fairly.

## CITIES FOR THE LEVITES

As we have often seen in Numbers, directions for the Levites follow directions for the other tribes. Here, they are given land along with the rest of the nation. The importance of the Levites in supporting the holiness of the people has been a theme throughout the book, and that is affirmed again with their allocation in the promised land.

The spatial limits set on their land meant that no one could complain of infringement on their territory. But it is appropriate that they were given cities throughout the land, since they would

be providing ministry to the Israelites wherever they settled. And because they were providing that ministry, the Lord expected the people to provide for them. Just as they were commanded to tithe in chapter 18, they are also commanded to protect designated space for the Levites and their families.

#### CITIES OF REFUGE

Of all the sections that we are covering today, the cities of refuge stand out as a sore thumb. We would expect to see land divisions, designated tribal leaders, provisions for the Levites, etc., but cities to protect murderers is definitely a surprise.

The holiness of Israel is of supreme importance—as indicated by the significance of the Levites in the previous passage. God cannot live among sinful people, and murder is the most serious of all sins committed against another person. So it is fitting that it should be addressed here before the Israelites set out on their conquest.

What the law is concerned with here is whether the murder was intentional (murder vs. manslaughter). In the cases when it was intentional, the law commands that the murderer be put to death; there is simply no place for murderers among God's holy nation. But in the cases when the death may have been accidental, the case would be presented before the congregation, and they would decide if the murder was premeditated. During this time, the cities provided protection for the accused, while allowing the people to gather witnesses and understand what happened before bringing the case forward. They also provided an impartial group of peers to hear the case and decide the verdict. If the murderer was found guilty on the basis of two or more witnesses, they would be put to death. But if they were found innocent of premeditation, then they may live safely in the city of refuge until the death of the high priest.

So the cities of refuge serve two purposes: they protected the manslayer from the avenger, and they provided confinement for convicted manslaughterers. That is not to say that the confinement made atonement for the death. Only the death of the high priest could atone for that kind of killing; that is why the convict was only freed at his death, not after serving any number of years in confinement (or doing any other penitent act).

This should teach us several things about God. First, it teaches us about the sanctity of life. Because man is made in the image of God, every human life is to be valued and protected. Whether an Israelite or a stranger or a sojourner, all life is equal. Second, it teaches us that God is just and requires justice among his people. He ensures that justice is carried out not only for the deceased by prosecuting the guilty, but also for the accused by protecting them until the trial. And beyond that, the fact that he differentiates between premeditated and accidental death shows that he is concerned with carrying out fair and equitable punishment for the offender. Third, it teaches us that God is holy. All sin is an offense against God, who dwells in the land. If God is to be among the people, the people must be holy as he is.

#### FEMALE INHERITANCE

The last chapter in Numbers picks up the topic of female heirs that began in chapter 27. If these daughters are to inherit the land of their father and marry someone from another tribe, what would happen to the land? In that case, the land would become the property of a man from another tribe. That could cause major disruptions to the tribal allocations that the Lord already laid out in chapter 34. The solution is to have the women marry within their own tribe, which they did as the Lord commanded.

On the surface, it may seem like this is a very abrupt and irrelevant ending to the book of Numbers. And in some ways, it is. Back in chapter 27, immediately following the case of the daughters of

Zelophehad, the Lord tells Moses that he is about to die and commands him to appoint Joshua as his successor. Now that the case of the daughters is brought up again, we would expect to see Moses' death and Joshua's succession brought up again too. But we get nothing. There is no resolution. We are left waiting for the fulfillment of Moses' death and Joshua's appointment. We are left waiting for a *sequel*.

And that is exactly what we get. Moses' death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy and the book of Joshua picks up with his new appointment to leadership. As we said in the very beginning, the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) are dependent on one another. Though we read and discuss them as individual books, you cannot entirely separate them from each other. And that is exactly what we see here. The book of Numbers records the Israelites' journey from Sinai to the promised land. For details before or after that journey, we look to other books in the Pentateuch.

In other ways, this is a fitting conclusion to the book of Numbers. The last six laws in 33:50–36:13 address the promised land, its distribution, its boundaries, and its holiness. The entire book has been a journey towards this, and now the Israelites are about to realize it. God promised Abraham in Genesis 17:8, “And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.” The book of Numbers has been both a confirmation of this promise and the beginning of its fulfillment. And now, “on this strong note of hope the book closes, inviting the curious to read on to see how God's purposes were worked out in the subsequent history of Israel.”<sup>57</sup>

## A P P L Y

With the book ending on a sort of cliffhanger here, it seems only appropriate to ask: what will you read next? Will you continue on



with the story of the Israelites? Or do you have plans to read another book of the Bible?

At the end of a Bible study, there is nothing more important than making a plan for what you will read next—because we all know how easy it is to let weeks and weeks go by unless we already have a plan. We are far more likely to remain diligent in our Bible reading and our prayer if we know what our next step will be.

And an equally important question to ask is: who will you study the Bible with? Just as we are far more likely to read the Bible if we have a plan, we are far more likely to learn and be challenged if we read the Bible with a partner. Over the last few weeks, we have had the privilege of reading the Bible alongside fellow believers. We have sharpened one another, we have encouraged one another, we have prayed for one another. That is not only a blessing; it is a habit to be developed. We should develop the habit of reading Scripture together and discussing it together. We should develop the habit of sharing our observations and our insights. We should develop the habit of asking, *what does this passage teach us about Christ and how are we going to live differently because of it?*

1. So which book of the Bible are you going to read next? Take your time to answer this. This isn't for anyone else; this is for you. Ask God to direct you, and pick what book you will read.

2. Who will you read it with? Start by praying for God to put someone on your mind. But then don't just write down a name—ask someone right now. Seriously, call or text them right now. Get yourself a partner to read and pray with. It doesn't have to be forever. Start by asking if they would commit to meeting once a week for the next month. After that, you guys can always reevaluate.

## C L O S E

One last time?

**Passage:**

**What it is about:**

**Why it is important:**

**Biblical truth to meditate on today:**

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*

Colossians 3:16–17

# POST BIBLE STUDY

## *numbers debrief*

Ok, ok. You caught me. I know we are done with Numbers, but I really couldn't help myself. I had to add *one more day*. (Typical, right?) Welcome to the *after party*.

Now that we have finished our study, I want to encourage you to spend the next week reflecting on the book of Numbers. Break it into sections and read through it again. Journal all of your thoughts and all of the lessons that God has taught you. Write down all the new insights that you see by reading it again. Keep a record of those thoughts to reflect on, because they are truly precious.

Last week we talked about what book of the Bible you will study and who you will study it with. I'm sure you don't need a reminder to pick a book, because you have already done that, but hypothetically, let's make some suggestions. After you finish reading through Numbers again this week, think about continuing the story of the Israelites and studying the book of Joshua. Or if you haven't gone through the Gospel of John right now as the elders are preaching through it, think about studying John.

Let me suggest a few books that might be helpful alongside the Bible. You and your Bible-reading partner might want to go through these together.

1. The first suggestion is *How to Eat Your Bible* by Nate Pickowicz. This is a really short, helpful book on how to read your Bible. There are plenty of different methods out there; this is simply one of them. But it is a great place to start.

2. The second suggestion is about commentaries. If you want to go deeper in your Bible reading, think about going through one of these. Again, there are tons of great commentaries out there, but let me make it easy by mentioning just two: Tyndale Old (or New) Testament Commentaries and the Bible Speaks Today. Both of these series are excellent, and they are both very different. Tyndale follows the traditional verse-by-verse approach, where BST focuses more on the meaning than the details. If you want a preview of the books, sometimes you can scroll them on [books.google.com](https://books.google.com). Then you can get a feel for the book and decide if you want to buy it.

As you read through your next book, don't forget to be memorizing and meditating on God's word. You may want to start by making sure you have finished memorizing all of the verses from this study.

And most importantly, praise God for the work he has done in the past few weeks. May he continue to richly bless you in the ways that you seek him through prayer and Bible reading.

*And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:9–14).*

# Maps and Charts

## ARRANGEMENT OF THE CAMP

	Dan	Asher	Naphtali	
Benjamin	Merari			Judah
Manasseh	Gershon	Tabernacle	Priests	Issachar
Ephraim	Kohath			Zebulun
	Gad	Simeon	Reuben	

## ROUTE OF THE EXODUS<sup>58</sup>



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- <sup>33</sup> Oden and Crosby, *Ancient Christian Devotional*, 179.
- <sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 133.
- <sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 133.
- <sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 134.
- <sup>37</sup> Oden and Crosby, *Ancient Christian Devotional*, 248.
- <sup>38</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 152.
- <sup>39</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 153.
- <sup>40</sup> Oden and Crosby, *Ancient Christian Devotional*, 194.
- <sup>41</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*, 155.
- <sup>42</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries*,), 155–156.
- <sup>43</sup> Cole, *Numbers*, 350.
- <sup>44</sup> Cole, *Numbers*, 351.
- <sup>45</sup> Oden and Crosby, *Ancient Christian Devotional*, 257.
- <sup>46</sup> Brown, *Numbers*, 203.
- <sup>47</sup> *Valley of Vision*, 178.
- <sup>48</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 163.
- <sup>49</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 183.
- <sup>50</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 169.
- <sup>51</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 188.
- <sup>52</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 206.
- <sup>53</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 205.
- <sup>54</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 206.
- <sup>55</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 212.
- <sup>56</sup> Origen, Homily 27 on Numbers, in *Origen*, trans. R. Greer, Classics of Western Spirituality (London: SPCK, 1979), 247.
- <sup>57</sup> Wenham, *Numbers*, 240
- <sup>58</sup> "Route of the Exodus," *Biblical Places Maps*, Logos Bible Software.