

Israel in the Wilderness (Numbers)

God brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery to bless them as His own people. He spared them during the plagues, then demonstrated His power by providing for and protecting them. Sadly, they often complained about their conditions and failed to be thankful (Num. 2-14). God was not pleased.



After receiving the Law, they journeyed to Kadesh-Barnea where one man from each tribe went up to spy out Canaan. The most notable of these were Caleb (from Judah) and Joshua (from Ephraim). The land was beautiful, but the other ten men argued that they were unable to go up against the strong people there. Caleb and Joshua disagreed, arguing that they could go up and take the land because God was fighting for them. The people wouldn't listen.

Because of their disbelief, they would have to wander in the wilderness for 40 years, waiting for that first generation to die. Of this generation (over 20 years old), only Joshua and Caleb would go into the promised land.

Confirming the High Priest

Korah was a Levite who desired to be a priest. He thought that Moses and Aaron had exalted themselves above everyone else, so he gathered 250 leaders together against

them. Moses was distraught, telling Korah that God would show whom He had chosen. They gathered with firepans for incense outside of the tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord appeared. The ground opened up to swallow

the rebels, demonstrating that God had chosen Aaron and his family for the priesthood (Num. 16).

As an added confirmation of Aaron, God had leaders of each tribe write their names on a stick (Num. 17). These were then put in the Tabernacle, and the one which sprouted would indicate whom God had chosen. Aaron's budded, showing God had chosen him.

Moses Sins

Though Moses was a man of faith, he was not flawless. This is seen in the fact that he sinned himself. After the people complained again, Moses disobeyed God in striking a rock for water and speaking in a way that failed to honor God (Num. 20). The consequence of his actions was that he could not bring the children of Israel into the land. Not even Moses could sin against God without repercussions.

The Bronze Serpent

The people once again began to complain

about food and water, saying that they loathed the “miserable food.” In response, the Lord sent “fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (Num. 21:6).

The people confessed that they had sinned, and Moses was told to set up a serpent on a standard. Whoever was bitten could then look at it and live. Moses made one of bronze and set it up so that the people who looked at it were spared. Jesus compared this to His death on the cross (John 3:14-15). As the serpent was lifted up among the people to save them, so Jesus was lifted up.

Balaam

Moab feared Israel. Balak, the king, tried to hire Balaam, a prophet, to curse Israel (Num. 22). God told Balaam not to go, but as Balaam insisted, God allowed it. The angel of the Lord stood in Balaam’s path, rebuking him via his donkey. When Balaam’s eyes were opened, he confessed his sin, and as the story unfolds, we find Balaam unable to place a curse on Israel.

God’s plans cannot be thwarted. No matter who it is, or how much one has, no one can stand against God. As Balaam spoke in one of his oracles: “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19)

Sadly, there were other ways to curse Israel. Israel began to “play the harlot with the daughters of Moab” (Num. 25 -26) They offered sacrifices and bowed down to the gods of Moab (Baal). Because of this, God had the leaders who engaged in this slain out in the open.

While the people wept over this, one of the Israelites brought a Midianite woman to his brothers. Phinehas, a priest, saw this, took a spear, and pierced the man and woman through so that “the plague on the sons of Israel was checked.” 24,000 died because of the sins of the people.

Idolatry is the one problem that the children of Israel allowed to plague them through their history. They did not completely drive out the idolatrous people around them, and so was a thorn in their side. The following generations would still “play the harlot” with false gods.

The book of Numbers shows how the people journeyed through the wilderness to the border of the Promised Land. God provided for them, protected them, and even judged them in the process. The first generation out of Egypt would not enter, but their children would. As the book closes, the people are poised to go into the land and receive that inheritance long before given to Abraham.

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