

Devotional
Meditations on the
Book of Numbers

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Note: this is a draft copy in need of editing

#1 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 1:1-54

In the Hebrew Bible, the book known as "Numbers" is titled "In the Wilderness." This phrase is derived from the first Hebrew words in Numbers 1:1. The English title comes from the two censuses that play a significant role in the book. Censuses involve counting or "numbering" of the people. In this respect, the English title is not inaccurate. But the Hebrew title carries more theological significance. Israel was literally in the wilderness during the 40-year period between the Exodus and the Conquest. Spiritually speaking, Israel also finds itself in a wilderness of trouble. God displays His wrath against sin and unbelief, but also exhibits perfect patience and faithfulness towards His unfaithful people.

Chapter 1 begins with a census. Initially, it may seem tedious to read due to the numerous Hebrew names that are challenging to pronounce. But the details provides valuable insights into what is about to unfold. Verses 2-3 indicate that this census is not a general count of all the people of Israel, but a special one focusing on able-bodied men aged twenty years and older who are capable of fighting in war. Moses is assisted by representatives from each of the twelve tribes, who count the total number of able-bodied men. The count for each tribe ranges from approximately 32,000 to 75,000, with a total of 603,500 for the entire nation.

What does this tell us? Fundamentally, it serves as a reminder that we, as God's people, are engaged in a spiritual war. While this war took on physical form during the days of Moses and Joshua, it has now transitioned to a more directly spiritual battle in the New Testament era. Nevertheless, it remains a war. We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the powers of sinful flesh and the kingdom of darkness. This battle cannot be fought alone; we require the assistance of God and His Holy Spirit, along with the fellowship of fellow saints who constitute the army of God.

The spiritual nature of this battle was already foreshadowed in the time of Moses. Verses 47-54 remind us that there was a special tribe set apart from the others—the Levites. They are not included in the military census because they have a distinct purpose: the worship of God.

One might argue that the circumstances of war would relieve the Levites of their ceremonial duties. However, they remained dedicated to conducting the rituals of worship. They were not exempt from the battle; instead, they were directly engaged in it through spiritual means. The text indicates that they had a military role as "guards" of the tabernacle. Outsiders were not permitted to invade the sacred space. This was not the first time the Levites fulfilled a military-guard function; in Exodus 32:27-28, they were commanded to execute the idolaters among their own people. This serves as a sober foreshadowing of the unfaithfulness and idolatry of Israel that occurs later in the book.

Additionally, this function reminds us of Adam's task to guard and keep the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:15). The same language of "guard and keep" is applied to the Levites in their role at the tabernacle. This vocabulary underscores the connection between these two situations. Just as Eden was a garden-temple where man enjoyed fellowship with God in a sinless world, God provided access to a restored paradise through His redemptive grace.

Christ came in the fullness of time as a new Adam to succeed where the first Adam failed. Adam failed to guard the garden against Satan, the great intruder. Jesus destroyed Satan when He broke the power of his kingdom on the cross. Although He initially had twelve disciples to serve as His fellow soldiers, they all abandoned Him. His only "numbering" was with the transgressors who were crucified with Him.

Through Him, we are part of a company of saints that constitutes the great army of God in the church. When we gather, our purpose is not to have a party, enjoy a good time, or have our preferences met. We come together to prepare for battle and to find healing from the wounds of our spiritual warfare. We gather to encourage one another to take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit. We are engaged in a spiritual fight for our lives and faith.

This is a timely reminder for us. The Christian life is a battle. Our enemy needs to be clearly identified. John speaks of our adversary as the world, the flesh, and the devil. The evil one is a shrewd strategist, using every opportunity to distract, divide, and

destroy the church. In our personal lives, we face many temptations that will hit us at our deepest weaknesses. When we are depressed we will be allured with the evil pleasures of sin. When we are hurt we will be ensnared in the bitterness that takes root and poisons our relationships with God and our brothers. When we are exposed in our sins, we may be tempted to succumb to shame and turn to hiding our faults in a variety of ways. The fear of shame keeps us from being truly free from the chains of sin. We need to see all this for what it truly is: not just a personal struggle, but a spiritual war.

We are truly in the fight of our lives. But we have a Savior who is mightier than all our enemies. Christ is our captain and guide. He fights with us and for us. The war may be wearisome, but the battle belongs to the Lord.

#2 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 2:1-34

Numbers 2 describes the arrangements of the camp of Israel as they move through the wilderness on the way to the promised land. It is perhaps easiest to understand in visual form. If seen from the air, the text describes a layout that looks like this:

While this visualization resembles a cross, it is doubtful that this was an intentional part of its typology of God's plan in Christ. There are, however, other ways in which we see God's redemptive plan prefigured in this layout of the camp of Israel.

Note that the 12 tribes are arranged into groups of three which surround the tabernacle on the east, south, west, and north (listed in that order). Their arrangement generally corresponds to the relative location of their settlements in Canaan. In other words, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali are placed north of the tabernacle just as they will be in the northern parts of Israel. Gad, Simeon, and Reuben are generally in a more southward direction. The rest are towards the center of the nation.

The one modest exception is the camp of Judah. Although it is technically in the southwest of Israel it is placed on the east side. Ephraim and Manasseh are grouped with Judah and are also a little out of place. They are placed on the east side of the camp although they actually settle in land on the west.

This displacement draws attention to these tribes. The reason is not too difficult to discern. Judah is placed in a prominent position because of its special place as the royal tribe from whom the Messiah would come. Ephraim and Manasseh were both half-tribes descending from Joseph. He also had a royal place among the Israelites as he was exalted over them as ruler of Egypt.

The wording connects their position to the location of the sun: "...on the east side toward the sunrise" (2:3). This means that every morning the sunlight would shine over the tribes of Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh. This is perhaps connected to the

coming of the Promised Messiah from Judah. In Malachi, Christ's coming is likened to the "sun of righteousness" which will "arise with healing in its wings" (Mal. 4:2). The daily sunrise would thus remind them of God's promise which would be fulfilled through Judah. From him the scepter will not depart. A lion from the tribe of Judah will arise as a savior for Israel.

In addition to the prominence of Judah, the arrangement also reinforces the centrality of the worship of God. The tabernacle is placed in the center of Israel, with the Levites surrounded by the rest of the tribes. Their central location is also reinforced by their appearing in the middle of the passage itself (i.e. verse 17).

This obviously points them to the centrality of God and his worship in their life as a nation. Their entire purpose is to be a receptacle of the revelation of God. This is true both personally and redemptive-historically. God is to be the center of their heart's affection.

In the fullness of time a Savior would come from the womb of Israel. He would be not only a king from Judah but also a priest greater than Aaron and the order of the Levites. He would establish an eternal temple in heaven for the endless worship of God. He would come as the lion of the tribe of Judah to sit on the throne of David forever.

In this simple passage, we see a revelation of the coming Messiah and our lives in him. He is our king. In faith and repentance, we bow our knees to him and submit to his kingship. He is our priest. Through him, we have a final sacrifice to put away our sins and are given access to God by grace. We belong to the great company of the spiritual Israel consisting not only of the 12 Jewish tribes, but people from every tribe, tongue, and nation.

#3 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 3:1-51

In Numbers 2, we have a description of the layout of the camps of Israel. The twelve tribes were arranged in camps on the north, south, east, and west, with the tabernacle and the Levites in the center. We saw previously how this emphasized the centrality of God and His worship in the nation's life. Israel was preparing for battle, not only against flesh and blood but also against spiritual forces of evil. The center of the fight was through the tabernacle and the priesthood. However, it is through Christ, the ultimate priest, king, and temple, that this battle is ultimately won.

In Numbers 3, our attention is directed toward the center of Israel's arrangement, particularly focusing on the tribe of Levi and their various divisions and duties in relation to the tabernacle.

What theological and spiritual lessons does this passage teach us?

First, the passage begins with a reminder of the unfaithfulness and death of Nadab and Abihu, serving as a warning against the perils of unbelief. Apostasy and rebellion invite the judgment of God. However, there is a deeper point being made regarding the role of the Levitical institutions in redemptive history. The entire Old Testament order started with death and failure. Although the types were sufficient during this time to point people to the coming Messiah, by itself it could not save. This truth is vividly illustrated in the example of Nadab and Abihu. The Levitical priesthood was characterized by death. Death prevented the priests from continuing in office, making their priesthood temporary. Their weakness as sinners also limited the priesthood. They had to offer sacrifices not only for their own sins but also for the sins of the people.

This reminds us of our need for a greater priest who has come in the person of Jesus Christ. He is perfect, sinless, and has offered a final sacrifice for sins. He belongs to a higher and greater order than the priesthood of Aaron and the tribe of Levi. He holds His priesthood forever.

Additionally, in this passage, another theological point emerges through the repeated use of the word "guard." The Levites, according to their clans, were commissioned to "keep guard" over the tabernacle and its furnishings. This language recalls the commission given to Adam in the Garden of Eden to "guard and keep it." In a ritual and spiritual manner, the Levites shared with the other tribes the military calling placed upon the entire nation.

This language should also be interpreted in light of the other garden imagery associated with the tabernacle. As we observed in our devotional meditations on Leviticus, the tabernacle was filled with garden imagery. Ultimately, it represented a copy and shadow of the heavenly garden, the Paradise of God. However, through this also indirectly reminded them of the Garden of Eden. Just as Adam and Eve were to protect God's garden sanctuary from the invasion of Satan, the Levites were entrusted with guarding the tabernacle.

However, similar to Adam's failure, the Levites also failed in their duty. As we see in Israel's later history, they allowed the idols of the nations and the worship of Satan to infiltrate the tabernacle and temple of God.

Yet, in the fullness of time, God would send a faithful priest who would effectively guard God's sanctuary from Satan. We recall that during the temptation, Satan, at one point, set Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. However, Jesus did not succumb to his bait but resisted temptation. Furthermore, Jesus would be tested in a garden—the Garden of Gethsemane—where He submitted Himself to God's will, even to the point of suffering, in order to preserve God's holy sanctuary.

As with the failure of Nadab and Abihu, the failure of the Levites to faithfully guard and keep the tabernacle drives them to the coming Messiah who alone can save. It highlights the success of Jesus and His victory over Satan.

Finally, the passage emphasizes the role of the "firstborn" in the life of Israel. Essentially, the Levites take the place of the "firstborn" among the other tribes, setting them apart for a special purpose in service to the Lord.

There are numerous ways to connect this to redemptive history. For example, in the Exodus Israel as a nation is called God's "firstborn son." Adam also is referred to as a son of God in Luke's genealogy. Space does not permit a fuller explanation of these ideas. However, it is evident that the fulfillment of this idea is found in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the eternal firstborn of the Father.

When we combine these ideas together, we have a multifaceted picture of the Messiah yet to come. He is the firstborn son of God who succeeds where all others had previously failed. In summary, this passage reminds us of the weakness and ultimate failure of the entire Old Testament order. It would eventually pass away and give way to something better through the Lord Jesus Christ.

As people living today, we walk in the light of the blessings He has brought. Though Satan may rage against us, we have a victorious Captain and Guide. While the devil continues to seek to corrupt the worship of the one true God and distort the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, he calls ministers of the Word to be faithful watchmen, preserving the purity of the truth and its preaching. Through faith in Christ, we find the strength to persevere through such assaults. We can find great examples of this faithfulness in the lives of the apostles and throughout church history.

While the passage clearly reminds us of our weaknesses as human beings, it also encourages us in the power of Christ through His Spirit. Through Christ, God's firstborn Son, we have become adopted sons of God. As we engage in the battle, we do so as beloved children of God. He blesses and sustains us, providing encouragement and strength until the final battle is over and the victory is fully won.

#4 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 4:1-49

Numbers 4 contains a mini-census of a sub-group among the Levites. It consists of the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites, who were appointed to manage the tabernacle and its furnishings. The Kohathites were caretakers of the most holy things, such as the veil, the cover of the ark of the testimony, the table, dishes, utensils, lampstand, etc. The Gershonites were responsible for carrying the curtains of the tabernacle, the hangings of the court, and similar items. The Merarites took care of the frames, bars, pillars, and other smaller instruments for setting up the tabernacle.

From a theological and spiritual perspective, several points can be observed regarding the division of labor among the sons of Levi:

First, it serves as a reminder that God is a God of order. He assigns different tasks to different people as He sees fit. This parallels the creation of man and woman in the Garden of Eden, where distinct roles were given to each gender. Although both shared a calling under God, the woman was created to assist the man in their joint task. Much of the division of labor was biologically determined and related to their joint task of procreating. They were to fill the earth and subdue it. The man was to work the ground while the woman was to bear children. It is not that woman cannot also work the ground. She can and does as a helper to her husband. It is the case that the man is not able to bear children as she can. There was equality in their essential humanity as the image of God, but also an order in the division of labor rooted in God's revealed will and in harmony with their created constitutions. Similarly, the Levites were set apart from the rest of Israel to oversee the worship of God. We see in the story of Saul how a king was not to take upon himself the duties of priest, nor the priest a king. In the New Testament, God ordains that men only serve as pastors, elders, and deacons, with different tasks assigned to each in the service of His church. Even within the Trinity, there is a division of Divine work, with the Father planning redemption, the Son fulfilling it, and the Spirit applying it to the lives of God's people. On various levels we see that God is a God of order, assigning different tasks and callings as he sees fit. Our starting point in answering these kinds of questions is very simple: what has God said?

It is easy to grow discontent with the task God has assigned to us. We naturally look at that which is “off limits” as an injustice. This is a manifestation of our sinful discontentment. It began in the Garden of Eden when our first parents were deceived into regarding God’s prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Our discontentment comes from our sinful natures and cannot be ascribed to God's lack of wisdom. Sin has corrupted our lives such that pain and toil will inevitably characterize our lives. This was true from sin's first entrance into the world. The man was given great pain in his working the ground, while the woman had great pains in childbearing. Church officers are to serve with the joy of Christ, but because of sin, it can often be discouraging. Whatever the situation, we think that by modifying our task or moving to another place we will be able to alleviate the pain and misery of sin. These efforts are doomed to failure. These things will follow us in some form wherever we go. We must patiently trust in God's wisdom whatever task he assigns to us.

Secondly, the division of labor emphasizes that while God is present with His people, His permanent form had not yet been established in the Old Testament. This is why the worship of God took place in a tent (tabernacle) rather than a temple. The specific responsibilities assigned to these groups were due to the tabernacle needing to be packed up and carried with Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness. Even after Israel arrived and the Temple was constructed, God repeatedly reminded them that no earthly temple could contain Him. He dwells in heaven while remaining present among His sojourning people on earth.

Thirdly, the passage establishes a clear limitation on the years of service for these priests in their respective duties. The census includes only men between the ages of 30 and 50 who were assigned to these tasks. Numbers 8:25 sets a "retirement" age for the Levites at 50 years old. While they may continue to support and minister to their brothers, they are no longer to perform active service. Similarly, many churches recognize an "emeritus" status for ministers after many years of service. These retired ministers often provide support, counsel, and instruction for younger ministers, even though they are no longer on the "front lines" of pastoral ministry. Some argue that the Bible does not recognize a "retirement" period, but this passage clearly indicates otherwise.

Putting this all together, we find in this passage another prefiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Him, God assigned a task that only He could perform. He took upon Himself the office of Messiah as our prophet, priest, and king. More specifically, in Him, heaven and earth are perfectly united. John 1:14 declares that in His incarnation, the "Word became flesh and dwelt ("pitched His tent") among us..." He is the permanent Temple of God in whom the fullness of God dwells in bodily form (Col. 2:9). Although He now dwells forever in heaven, He is also present with His people by His Spirit as they wander in this world. It is significant that Jesus took up these duties as our Messiah when He was 30 years old, in accordance with the Old Testament provisions for the age of priests outlined in this chapter. However, unlike them, He did not "retire" at 50. He died and rose again and continues His permanent priesthood in heaven.

Numbers 4 may initially appear as a tedious list of names and duties that no longer apply to us. However, in it, we have the mystery of Christ revealed to us in shadowy form. Let us then renew our faith in Christ, our final prophet, priest, and king. Let us trust only in His merits, rest only in His love, and serve only Him with our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

#5 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 5:1-31

This chapter can be easily divided into three sections that deal with provisions for ritual uncleanness through defiling contact, restitution for breaking faith, and a test for adultery in cases with no witnesses.

The first two sections are fairly straightforward in terms of the details. If a person is leprous, has a discharge, or touches a dead body, they are considered unclean and must be put outside the camp of Israel. These provisions essentially summarize the guidelines outlined in Leviticus 13-15, which we explored more extensively in our meditations on those chapters.

Likewise, if anyone breaches faith by lying in a financial agreement, they are required to make restitution by repaying what was withheld plus an additional twenty percent. This matter was also discussed in Leviticus (see chapter 6).

These provisions offer clear spiritual lessons for Israel (and us) about the nature of our relationship with God. On one hand, sin defiles us and separates us from God. When we sin, we need to be cleansed by God's grace in order to be restored to the company of His holy saints. However, sin also incurs a debt that must be repaid. Only through the precious blood of Christ can true payment be made for the infinite debt caused by our sins.

In addition to summarizing what we have previously learned, this passage introduces something new, which may sound somewhat strange—the provision in verses 11-31 regarding a test for adultery.

So, what does this passage teach us in Christ?

First, let's remember that this was not the "ordinary" way of handling cases of adultery. The usual procedure followed the principles of justice that govern nearly all cases. In instances of sin, every accusation needed to be established based on two or three witnesses. Credible evidence was required to substantiate the charges. The case law for adultery situations is outlined in Deuteronomy 22 and elsewhere.

In this regard, one crucial point to remember is that the Scriptures admonish us not to hastily or recklessly bring charges against another person, whether formally or informally. While accusations may be necessary at times, we also cause harm to the reputation of the accused when making them. That's why false or frivolous charges were punished with a fine (Deut. 22:19). Even true charges can be brought with a bad motive that ultimately leads to destruction.

The provision in Numbers 5, however, applies when there is a strong, credible suspicion of adultery but no witnesses to support the claim. Sexual sin often occurs in secret, and especially in cases of adultery, it inflicts great damage on the marriage relationship. In Jesus's teaching, it is identified as the sole ground for divorce. [Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, also identifies willful desertion, but that is a discussion for another time.]. The situation is therefore an exceptional one, and not the ordinary course of procedure.

The passage describes this reality as the "spirit of jealousy" that overcomes the offended party in the marriage. It is symbolized visually through the "water of bitterness" that plays a significant role in the test the woman undergoes. Unresolved suspicions of adultery are not easily endured with love and patience.

So, what should Israel do in cases where there is a strong suspicion of unfaithfulness but no evidence to proceed according to the ordinary provisions of the law? In such cases, God provides a special provision to settle the matter.

Let us also keep in mind that all of this takes place "before the Lord" according to the unique circumstances of God's presence with the Israelites (see verse 30). This test, therefore, took place under the direct, special supervision of God in the context of the theocracy. In other cases, God provided a means of Divine consultation

through the Urim and the Thummin, by which the people could inquire about the will of the Lord. Similarly, this test is outlined to specially reveal the judgment of God in a difficult case. God Himself directly and specially oversaw the process. We should not think that the results were ever random or contrived. This is due to the special circumstances of God's presence with the Israelites.

Obviously, this provision is part of the typological and temporary arrangement of the theocracy and is not to be imposed today. However, it does contain vivid reminders of the nature of our sins. Sin finds its root in the heart, which is hidden from the eyes of men. We can sometimes succeed in keeping it hidden from others. Man looks at the outward appearance and therefore cannot see everything, but the Lord looks at the heart.

Likewise, we are reminded of the destructive power of sin. When we sin against others, the process of repentance must involve a deeper appreciation of how we have hurt them. In cases of infidelity, we deeply wound our spouse. Trust is broken, and the joy of friendship and fellowship is replaced by suspicion, distrust, and deep hurts. Justice can identify who is to blame, but only God's grace can bring healing to the wounded soul.

It is not without reason that God likens our sin against Him to spiritual adultery. Israel's idolatry is later vividly described as a spiritual adultery and a marital betrayal of God Himself (Ezekiel 16, Hosea 1-3).

In Christ, however, we have one who can truly bring forgiveness and grace to us in our spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness. Although we are a faithless bride, He has betrothed us to Himself, washing us with the water of His word. Although we are defiled by our sin, He cleanses us so that we will be presented before the Lord without spot, wrinkle, or any blemish. When we have experienced the bitterness of being betrayed by others in their unfaithfulness, God's grace can bring sweetness to the bitter and jealous heart.

#6-A - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 6:1-21

Numbers 6 contains the law of the Nazarite. The Nazarite vow was a special vow in which a man or a woman could devote themselves to God for a specific period of time. During this time, they were not allowed to drink alcoholic beverages or consume anything closely associated with them, such as grape seeds or skins.

Additionally, those under the vow were required to let their hair grow long, forbidding any haircuts. They were also prohibited from having any contact with a dead body, even if it was a close relative. Accidental contact resulting from a sudden death required atonement and was considered a sin (11). When the period of separation under the vow was completed, the individual had to bring a series of offerings before the Lord, shave their head, and put the hair on the fire under the sacrifice of the peace offering (18). After this, they were released from their vow and permitted to drink wine again.

What is the purpose of this vow? Firstly, it is worth noting that several important figures in redemptive history were under this vow. In Judges 13, we read about Samson, who was consecrated as a Nazarite from birth. Specifically, he was forbidden from consuming alcoholic beverages, eating anything unclean, and cutting his hair. You may recall the famous scene later in his life where Delilah manipulated him into revealing the "secret" of his strength, which was his hair. The point, of course, is not that Samson's hair possessed magical powers. Instead, his hair was a sign of his special consecration by God. In this case, he was made a savior and deliverer of his people, not by his own power, but by God's power.

The irony of Samson's life is that while outwardly he bore the sign of special consecration to God, his actual lifestyle did not reflect it. It was not by his power, but by the power of God's Spirit that his special consecration was effective for their deliverance (see Judges 14:6, 19; 15:14).

Later, another figure would arise who embodied both the form and substance of the Nazirite vow: the prophet Samuel (see 1 Sam. 1:11). It is noteworthy that Samuel held this status in connection to his role as a prophet and bearer of God's revelation.

In Amos, the Nazarite vow is described in connection with the work of the prophets, although Israel had been unfaithful in this regard (Amos 2:12).

The Apostle Paul also appears to have taken a Nazarite vow during his apostolic ministry. It plays a crucial role in the narrative of Acts as part of Paul's efforts to align with the practices of the Jews in order to win them to Christ. If Paul was willing to follow the rules of Moses and devote himself to God for a season, it would be unjust to accuse him of recklessly abandoning the law of Moses.

What Moses foretold and foreshadowed through this vow finds fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ. The vow and its provisions served as a sign for earlier figures in redemptive history that they had a special role for God's people, either as a savior/deliverer or a revealer of God's will. Jesus is our ultimate Savior and prophet. His entire life, starting from birth, was dedicated to a single consecrated purpose: to glorify the Lord and bring salvation to his people. He practiced not only abstaining from certain haircuts and drinks but lived a life of complete self-denial in the service of God.

Although Jesus was not a Nazarite in the technical sense, his consecration to God was greater than the provisions outlined in this passage. It is worth noting that during his crucifixion, he even refused the vinegar wine, which may be connected to the law of consecration in the Nazarite vow.

Through his Spirit, we too are consecrated to God's service. The specific manifestations of consecration outlined in the Nazarite vow have passed away in him. However, we are still called to live lives fully devoted to him. Whether we eat or drink or engage in any activity, we should do it all for the glory of God. Even the simplest acts of nourishing our bodies are considered consecrated through the word of God and prayer. Our devotion to God is expressed not primarily through abstinence, but rather through gratitude for his abundant provision (see 1 Tim. 4:4-5).

#6-B - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 6:22-27

The last part of Numbers 6 contains the blessing of Aaron to be pronounced upon the children of Israel. This blessing is still often used to conclude worship services in the NT era. The text contains the blessing itself (verses 24-26) as well as a brief introduction and conclusion on either side (verses 22-23 and 27).

The outer verses give an explanation of the nature of the blessing. Not only is the word "bless" used twice as an inclusio for the passage, but in verse 27, we are also told that in this blessing God puts His "name" on them. To "bless" in the Bible simply means to pronounce favor on another. It is the opposite of "cursing," which means to pronounce. Put most simply, to bless means to declare a good future and outcome for the person, while to curse is to pronounce a bad one.

When humans bless one another, we can, at most, simply declare our wish for them. If we love a person or they have shown themselves to be praiseworthy in their conduct, we can express our desire for them to be blessed in the future.

But when God blesses a person, it is far more than a mere wish. God's word has power. As verse 27 indicates, something monumental occurs when God pronounces His blessing upon us: He puts His name upon us.

We put names on things that we possess and that are precious to us. We sign papers with our names that legally indicate the ownership of our homes and properties. If an item is valuable or important to us, we will write our name and phone number on it. If it is lost, this will signify to the person who finds it where they can return it.

But this is also true of people. When two people get married, the wife takes the name of the husband. He loves her and she loves him. The bond of marriage ratifies that love, and the sharing of the last name signifies that mutual covenant possession and fellowship.

When God blesses us, He declares His covenant possession of us as His people. God's blessing finds its blessedness in the fact that through it God reminds us of His love for us. In that love, He has bought us with a price. He has redeemed us and taken us to Himself in covenant fellowship. Whatever we need in this life or in the life to come can only be found in God. He is the source of every individual blessing. We must never put the blessings above the One who blesses. We can never put the gift above the Giver.

Within these inner and outer verses, we read the blessing itself in verses 24-26. The three verses are the three lines of the blessing. Each one gets progressively longer, expanding the richness of our understanding of God's blessing upon us.

The Lord's covenant name (YHWH) appears three times: once in each line. This reinforces the covenantal character of the bond between God and Israel and the fact that God Himself is the source of all joy and blessing. There is no mention here of earthly types and shadows. No indirect reference to God's blessing through the earthly shadows of heavenly things. The focus is entirely upon YHWH Himself as the source of blessedness.

Likewise, the passage describes the blessing of God coming through his "face" or "countenance." These two English words translate the same Hebrew word (*panav*), which appears twice (once in 25 and once in 26). You may recall the story of Jacob wrestling with God at "Peniel." The same Hebrew word is used in that passage. You may recall how Jacob said, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Gen. 32:30). During his "wrestling" with the Lord, he pleaded that he might receive his blessing (32:26). Likewise, Moses desired to see God's glory but was forbidden to directly see God's face. He could only gaze upon his afterglow (Gen. 33:17-23).

God's blessing thus comes through the revelation of the countenance of God upon the people (indirectly through the priestly mediator—more on this below). How exactly are we to understand this? Think of how a child is affected by the face of their parent. If they are in a crowd of people, they may easily mistake a stranger for

a parent. They will hug a leg thinking it is their mom or dad, only to look up and see a strange face. Similarly, if they believe they are in trouble, they will look at the face of the parent to discern whether their face indicates a good or bad evaluation.

The blessing in this passage is a declaration that God's face will smile down upon God's people to give them reassurance of his favor to them. When we suffer and struggle, we need this reassurance of God's love.

Several other words are used in the blessing to further "exegete" or explain its full meaning and significance. In verse 24, we are told that God will "keep" us. This means that he will guide, guard, and protect us. What an assurance for Israel as they prepare for war with hostile forces. They wander through a perilous wilderness, but God is there to keep them.

Likewise, the blessing pronounces "grace" upon Israel. The Hebrew word *hanan* means to be merciful, favorable, or positively inclined towards another person. In the context of the Bible, this finds expression in the free, undeserved favor of God shown to sinners. Israel was not chosen because it was larger or more righteous than the nations. Instead, it was because of God's free choice and love. Again, it is not just an individual gift of grace that is in view here, but the gracious disposition of God himself towards his beloved people.

Likewise, the blessing concludes with a declaration of "peace" (*shalom*). Although they are at war with the kingdom of darkness, they have peace with God through his redeeming love. God's peace not only refers to the cessation of conflict but the fullness of joy and completeness that can come upon in that resultant state. God's blessing is the source of this peace.

How does this blessing come to us if it is pronounced only upon the sons of Israel? You will note that this blessing is pronounced by a special group of persons: Aaron and his sons. They were the high priest's family and served as types and shadows of a mediator who was to come: the Lord Jesus Christ.

In him, we have beheld the face and glory of God. Through his word (ratified in the sacrament of baptism), the name of the Triune God is placed upon us (Matthew 28:19). Unlike the priesthood of Aaron, which was temporary and characterized by death, Jesus holds his priesthood eternally. Therefore, his blessing upon us is certain and sure. It will never pass away.

What a blessing to receive the blessing of Jesus! Each worship service, we depart with the blessing of Jesus and the Triune God upon us. A minister (i.e., servant) of God and his word pronounces it upon us. It is not a mere wish and hope that good things might happen to us. It is an official pronouncement from God himself that through Christ, blessing, grace, and peace will most certainly come upon us. Through the power of his word, this blessing brings forgiveness to our sins, life to our death, and cleansing to our impurities. This blessing is not only pronounced for a time but remains and abides upon us all our days.

#7 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 7:1-89

Numbers 7 is one of the longest passages of the Bible. It records the offerings presented by the twelve tribes after the tabernacle had been erected and consecrated in the wilderness. It provides further details to the scene previously described in Exodus 40, where everything was set up according to God's instructions and the glory of the Lord filled the tent. The offerings are presented over a series of twelve days with one for each tribe.

There is a clear parallel pattern that repeats in each subsection. Each tribe presents offerings on silver plates, silver basins, and a golden dish. The offerings for each are of the same kind and the same amount, even though the tribes differ in size. Animals are also given as offerings, all in the same amount and of the same kind.

What are we to learn from this interesting and detailed description of the offerings of Israel? To be sure, many general points are reinforced here. There is the role of the Levites and our need for mediation to approach God now fulfilled in Christ. We see the value of the offerings and the vessels of gold and silver upon which they are presented. This symbolizes the highest value we ought to place upon God and the means he has given by which we can have communion and fellowship with him. They also remind us that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, which means that we should give him our best efforts and make him the center of our affections and pursuits. There is the presence of the twelve tribes, indicating that we approach God in a covenant community in the church, with whom we are united in a sacred bond of Christian fellowship. We also see the need for blood offerings to approach God, for without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

But perhaps the unique emphasis of the passages lies in its conclusion. After the twelve tribes present their various offerings to the Lord, the passage concludes with a reminder that Moses would enter into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, hearing God's own voice from the midst of the mercy seat on the ark of the testimony.

By placing the verbal revelation of God last, Moses is emphasizing its priority and abiding character. The sacrifices and offerings are given for a moment, but God's word continues forever. The apex of covenant fellowship comes not through the offerings of his people but in the true hearing of his word.

As Jesus reminds us, the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second is like it: to love our neighbor as ourselves. The scribe who heard Jesus added that these two commandments are greater than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:33).

Although it would have been quite the experience to participate in this great moment in redemptive history, we have something greater that is still with us: the living and abiding word of God. In Jesus God's word has come down and pitched his tent among us by assuming our human nature. Although his human nature is now far from us in heaven, he draws near by the power of his Holy Spirit. Although he dwells in heaven with the true Ark of God, he speaks to us from the spiritual mercy seat bringing his word of God. The offering we bring consists of the spiritual sacrifice of our heart's chief affections and all of our life's efforts. In Christ, these sacrifices are acceptable and pleasing to him--not by the merits of those who bring them, but by the power and mercy of Christ.

#8 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 8:1-26

This chapter contains provisions concerning the lampstand and the Levites.

The lampstand was in the holy place. As this was an enclosed space, it required a light source to illuminate it. This was provided for in the lampstand. It was a single "Menorah" with seven stems on it for seven candles. It resembled a tree or plant and was one of the aspects of the tabernacle that recalled the paradise imagery of the Garden of Eden.

As the New Testament indicates, the seven lampstands typologically represent the seven churches (Rev. 1:20). God has placed His light in the church. This light is manifested through His revelatory word as it is received by true and living faith. As the church walks by faith, it becomes the light of the world through Jesus Christ. God has deposited His own light in believers, who shine like stars in the darkness of this world as they embrace this word of life and light (Phil 2:14-16).

It is not insignificant that the lampstand is mentioned at this point in the narrative. The previous passage highlighted the importance of God's verbal revelation to Moses through the mercy seat. The proximity of the lampstand draws attention to the same principle in a different way: God's light comes through His word and is embodied and embraced by faith in His people.

After this, there are further provisions for the cleansing and consecration of the Levites. First, it is clear that prior to their consecration, they need to be cleansed. The Levites are set apart for God, but they are also sinners. They are the ones who bring cleansing, but they themselves must be cleansed. They make offerings for sin but must first do so for themselves as well as the people. Church leaders (whether in the Old Testament or New Testament) are not saviors. They must embody the faithfulness of the Christian life in an exemplary way, but they will not be without sin or weakness.

We are also reminded that the tribe of Levi takes on a special (typological) representative role for the rest of the nation. We have already seen in Leviticus that the priests are to lay hands on the animals when presenting them as offerings to the Lord. In this way, the sins of the people are vicariously transferred to the animal, serving as a substitute for the people in the process of atonement.

What is true for the offerings is also true for the Levites themselves. At their consecration, the people of Israel are to lay their hands on the Levites. This is because they are "substitutes" (as it were) for the firstborn sons of the Israelites. They stand in the presence of God on behalf of the Israelites, having been set apart for the priestly service.

Finally, the text concludes with a note about the retirement of the priests from regular service at the age of 50. They continue to have an honorific function of keeping guard at the sanctuary but are not to perform any service (8:26). In most churches, this principle is continued as ministers and elders can be granted the status of "emeritus," retaining their office but no longer serving "in the trenches" of ministry. It is also a reminder that the Levitical priesthood was always marked by its temporary nature. Priests had to be replaced and did not serve indefinitely.

All these things point us to Jesus, the final priest who is to come. He is the light of the world, come down in human flesh. He is the sinless Savior, consecrated by the Father Himself. As such, he has no need to offer for himself but can lay down his own life as a sacrifice for others. He is the firstborn Son of God. But having assumed our human nature, he is also chosen from among his brothers to be their merciful and faithful high priest. He holds his office forever. Having conquered the grave, death cannot bring an end to his ministry. Having been glorified with heavenly immortality, there is no need for him to retire due to infirmity.

By faith, we live in his grace and power. In this dark world, we walk by the light of his word. We live in communion with all the saints of God and, by faith, become a light to this world. Although we dwell now in the wilderness of the kingdom of darkness, by his grace, we are the dwelling place of God through his Holy Spirit.

#9 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 9:1-23

This chapter contains another description of the Passover feast, as well as the pillar of cloud and fire that covered the tabernacle while Israel was in the wilderness. To anticipate our conclusion at the outset, these realities were types of both Christ and the Holy Spirit.

We have heard of the provisions for the Passover several times before in Exodus and Leviticus. The difference here is that the Passover is not only mandated but actually celebrated in the wilderness. Furthermore, a question arises as to the application of the "holiness codes" during the feast. Some men had become ritually unclean through touching a dead body. This law had been discussed in Leviticus 21 (for the priests) and Numbers 5:2 (for the whole congregation). It will come up again in Numbers 19. Touching a dead body rendered a person ceremonially unclean and required a period of cleansing.

The trouble is that this ceremonial defilement occurred during the time of the Passover. This was one of the most important feast days as it recalled Israel's beginning as a nation in the Exodus from Egypt. Moses, therefore, made a special inquiry to the Lord. In response, God gave permission for the Israelites to eat the Passover even if they were ceremonially defiled through a dead body or on a long journey (Num. 9:10). Failure to keep the Passover would be regarded as sin and disobedience.

Why this special provision? It points us to the foundational importance of this feast as a type of Christ who was to come. The Passover was a feast of feasts in that it pointed to Christ and our redemption through his bloody death. This is so foundational to our Christian faith that the need for their participation in it outweighed the importance of the laws regarding ritual uncleanness.

This is also a good example of how the Bible places a certain priority on some obligations over others. Our duty to love God outweighs our duty to love our fellow men. The moral commandments outweigh the ceremonial. Even within the ceremonies themselves, there is an order of importance to be observed. So Jesus

tells us that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath—thus illustrating the allowance for works of necessity and mercy.

But more importantly here is the emphasis on the centrality of the atoning death of Christ. This is the heart of our faith. While the types and shadows of the Old Testament have passed away in him, we continue to have a sacrament devoted entirely to commemorating, signifying, and sealing Christ and his death to us. Without participation in his atoning death by faith, the laws regarding sanctification and cleansing are meaningless. There can be no cleansing from the filth of sin without forgiveness and justification.

As we see an emphasis on the centrality of Christ, we are also reminded here of the importance of God's Holy Spirit. After the discussion of the Passover is a reminder of the abiding presence of God through the pillar of cloud and fire. If the tabernacle typifies the incarnate body of Christ (John 1:14), the glory-cloud is a visible manifestation of God's Holy Spirit. Through Christ's work, the Spirit has been obtained and given to God's people (Acts 2). While we dwell in a corrupt and unclean world, we are purified and cleansed through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

So in Christ and the Spirit, we have the fullness of our redemption. In Christ, the final sacrifice has been offered, and our entry is opened into the Holy of Holies (Heb. 9:24, 10:19-22). Through the Spirit, we have the down payment of heaven, which will be paid in full at Christ's glorious coming (Eph. 1:14). As we live in this world, we are mindful of the constant temptation to succumb to the pleasure of sin and be defiled by the filth of the world. But through the Spirit's abiding presence, we are given power and protection from on high to be rescued from every temptation and every attack of the evil one. We must hold fast to our good confession and persevere in our precious faith. The wilderness years of this life are filled with trials and troubles, but one day we shall certainly reach the Promised Land of heaven.

#10 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 10:1-36

This chapter discusses the provisions for the silver trumpets of Israel. It begins with the description of Israel setting out as a camp from Mount Sinai into the wilderness.

The people were instructed to make silver trumpets, which differed from modern trumpets. These trumpets had a complex construction with multiple curves, three valves, and a mouthpiece capable of producing precise notes across several octaves. However, these "trumpets" were probably more like simple horns capable of only a few notes. While they had a musical function (as seen in their use in the Psalms), they primarily served as signaling devices. The blast of the trumpet would grab everyone's attention and prepare them for what was to come.

The text indicates a twofold general purpose for the trumpets: summoning the congregation and breaking camp. Sometimes one trumpet was blown, sometimes two. The trumpets would give either an "alarm" sound or a long blast, each serving as a different signal to direct the Israelites into different activities. Additionally, the trumpets would be sounded on appointed feast days, new moons, and during offerings. Aaron and the priests were appointed as the trumpeters.

Although the purpose of the trumpet blasts varied, one important function emphasized here is as an alarm to prepare for war. Israel was heading through the wilderness into the Promised Land, and arrival at their destination did not mean immediate peace. While God's grace and mercy were upon the Israelites, there was also His judgment against the evil nations in Canaan. One may recall the fall of Jericho, where its demise was brought about through a trumpet blast and a great shout from the people (Joshua 6:5). God's people lived in an age of battle and conflict, and the trumpet served as a reminder of this fact.

Elsewhere in the Bible, the spiritual meaning of the trumpet is further explained. Specifically, the trumpet is used as a metaphor for the clear teaching and proclamation of the word of God. This is most vividly developed in Ezekiel 33, where the prophet is likened to a trumpet-blowing watchman on the city walls. In the New Testament, Jesus himself appeals to the image of the trumpet as a picture of the

Gospel being proclaimed to the four corners of the earth (Matt. 24:31). In John's vision of Jesus in the book of Revelation, Jesus's prophetic voice in the church is said to be like the sound of a loud trumpet (Rev. 1:10). Clearly, God's trumpet still sounds as a signal to His people in the spiritual wilderness, summoning, warning, and guiding them toward the Promised Land.

After this, a description is given of Israel leaving Mount Sinai and embarking on their long journey through the wilderness. Although these years would eventually be marked by failure, unbelief, and judgment, it was not due to God's unfaithfulness. They were guided by God's Spirit in the form of the glory-cloud. They were fully When the New Testament describes our Christian lives as walking by the Spirit, this imagery has its roots in the Old Testament (Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16). Similarly, the Ark of the Lord went before them to seek out a resting place ahead of time (Num. 10:33). The Ark symbolized God's power and presence that go before them.

Yet, these provisions did not work *ex opere operato*. This Latin phrase means "by the deed done." In other words, the provisions of the Ark, the tabernacle, the glory cloud theophany, and the trumpets did not possess some inherent magical power. Instead, they served as means to assist the Israelites in their faith, through which they would be made effectual by God's grace and power. As we see in the next chapter, without true faith, these provisions not only become ineffective for God's people but also serve as signs of judgment against them for their sin and unbelief. Sadly, despite God's overwhelming provision of spiritual encouragement and protection, the people immediately turn to complaining about their earthly food.

Thus, the Israelites themselves serve as a warning and example to God's people, revealing our natural spiritual blindness and the deceitfulness of sin. Their failures are recorded for our instruction, as we are the ones upon whom the end of the ages has come (1 Cor. 10:11). While we are humbled by our weaknesses, we can find encouragement in God's strength. Therefore, if anyone thinks they stand, they should take heed lest they too fall. We are sobered by this reality but not driven to despair. Despite our unfaithfulness, God remains faithful and will preserve us in our faith, enabling us to endure to the end and be saved.

#11 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 11:1-35

This chapter is a turning point in the narrative. Things have been fairly positive so far in the story. We have seen the overwhelmingly sufficient provision of the Lord to equip his people in the wilderness. They are prepared for battle. The presence of the Lord is with them. They have visible reminders and manifestations of it all around them—even the pillar of cloud and fire above the sanctuary. Yet, the people become discontent and begin to grumble and complain. The chapter serves a twofold purpose for our benefit. On the one hand, it warns us against discontentment and complaint in our earthly situations, but also highlights the continued mercy of the Lord in spite of our failings.

The complaints in the chapter are manifold. They come not only from the people but also from Moses. The people complain of their physical weakness due to lack of food. Being hungry is not a sin, nor is asking God for food. Our Lord himself taught us this when he taught us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." The problem is that they are comparing the provision that God did provide in the manna with the alleged material blessings of Egypt. The people are definitely guilty of looking at the past with rose-colored glasses. If we simply read verses 4-5, one might think that their time of slavery in Egypt was actually like an all-inclusive resort vacation. In order to avoid the modest suffering of the wilderness in eating manna daily, they long to go back to their slavery in Egypt.

Not only the people, but Moses also complains against God. His is the typical complaint of a leader: stressed out, stretched thin, overwhelmed, pouring himself out but only hearing negative feedback from those whom he serves. Later he will add to this opposition from his own family in Miriam and Aaron. Yet in love, he continues to pray for the people that God's mercy may rest upon them. He has a God-sized responsibility to fulfill but (as great as he is) is still a mere man. On more than one occasion, he is ready to pack it up and quit. Ironically, he too becomes like the Israelites: longing for a different life free from the agonies of following God in the wilderness. In fact, he is so low emotionally that he even asks to be put to death that his misery might end (15).

These complaints reveal both our human weakness and our sinfulness. God's people did not lack provision. The people had bread from heaven to eat. Moses also had been given the Spirit of God. God's own strength, presence, and provision were with them. But the receptacle of that grace and strength proved itself to be weak.

In the midst of their weakness and sin, God manifested further mercy. For Moses, God appointed the seventy elders of Israel upon whom he put a share of the Spirit. With this, they would share the burden of Moses. It is noteworthy, however, that the Spirit of prophecy did not continue with them as it did with Moses. Although it does contain a note of judgment, God does provide Israel with meat in the wilderness, thus manifesting his mercy to his sinful people.

In the fullness of time, Jesus would come as the fulfillment of these things. In his public ministry, he would feed five thousand in a wilderness with miraculous bread and meat. Like Moses, the disciples would question where they could get enough food to feed the people. Jesus would supernaturally provide for them. Jesus would come as one greater than Moses. Although he appeared to have the Spirit with greater permanence than the elders, he only possessed a fading glory (as seen with the veil placed over his face). When Jesus came, the Spirit would not only descend but remain and abide upon him permanently. Although he has ascended into heaven, appearing now in the holy of holies on our behalf, he has sent his Spirit to all his people to equip them. He has also gifted the church with leaders, each with a portion of the Spirit, to minister to God's people. Ultimately, it is Christ himself who is their good shepherd, and the only one in whom they can put their hope.

We live now, like the Israelites, in a time of sojourning and wandering in the wilderness. The New Testament tells us to be sure to do everything without grumbling and complaining (Phil. 2:14), even pointing to this episode in the wilderness wanderings of Israel as an example for us to avoid (1 Cor. 10). The heavenly provision we have in Christ is of inestimable value. We are seated with him in heavenly places. We have the down payment of the promised land in our hearts through his Spirit. We have his word that directly connects us to the spiritual power of Christ as we hear it. These things are ours by faith and not by sight. After the pattern of Moses, we have our Savior who appears as a priest on our behalf, praying that we would be preserved in his grace and that his wrath would not be kindled against us.

When we face earthly troubles, let us remember the abundant spiritual provision of God for us. Let us renew our faith and see our lives after the pattern of what is revealed for us in Holy Scripture. God is faithful. He will allow times of trial and temptation as he did for the Israelites. He tests us to purify our faith, that it may shine like gold.

#12 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 12:1-16

The last passage saw the beginning of Israel's trouble in the wilderness. Tired of the heavenly manna, the people complained regarding God's provision. Even Moses lamented the situation to the Lord and fell into the classic blunder of every leader (even moms and dads!): complaining about all the complainers!

Numbers 13 tells of Moses's continued troubles. This time it truly is a family conflict as Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses. The occasion for this conflict is the "Cushite woman" Moses had married. We know from other passages that Moses was married to Zipporah, who was the daughter of Jethro. He married her when he had fled to Midian for 40 years after fleeing Egypt. There is debate as to her precise identity, but this need not occupy us in this meditation. We are not told the precise issue Miriam and Aaron have with her. But she does become the occasion (or perhaps "opportunity") for their opposing Moses.

The text tells us that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. Some see this as a classic example of "humble bragging" and use it to mock the idea of Mosaic authorship. It must be kept in mind that in this context, claiming to be "meek" is not an attempt at self-promotion, as it was not a desirable trait for a leader. You may recall that at his initial call, Moses was quite hesitant to accept God's call, pointing to his many deficiencies. At the same time, Aaron was given a key position as a spokesperson on Moses's behalf to the people. Just as Moses represented God to the people, so Aaron would speak for Moses (Ex. 3:14-16).

Miriam also had a prophetic function at certain points in Israel's history. After the crossing of the Red Sea, she famously sang the song of victory to the other women (Ex. 15:20-21). Recall that in the previous passage, Moses also rejoiced in the prophesying of Eldad and Medad, upon whom the Spirit had come to rest. He even expressed his desire that all of God's people would have the same Spirit of prophecy (Num. 11:29).

This produced an occasion in which the unique role of Moses was called into question by Aaron and Miriam. They argued for a more democratic approach in

which they and others had more of an "equal" share in prophetic authority. But God would have nothing of this. He immediately intervened by appearing in the pillar of cloud and made a stark contrast between the "regular" prophet and his special servant Moses. The "ordinary" prophets receive revelation through dreams and riddles. But with Moses, God speaks clearly and face to face. As other passages indicate, Moses's face visibly shone with the glory of God as a visible ratification of his special status.

This points to a general principle we should pause to reflect upon. God has not given everyone the same task. This was true in the beginning and is embedded in creation. All humans (male and female) are made in God's image and fundamentally equal. Both shared in a common calling to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. But both shared in that calling in different ways. This is seen in the way sin has affected their spheres of operation. For the man, the ground would produce thorns and thistles as his work was cursed. His life would be pain and toil until the ground would consume him. Likewise, Eve would have great pains in childbearing, although through her, the longed-for Messiah would come.

Paul similarly addresses this principle when he likens the church to a body with many parts. Christ is the head, giving direction, authority, purpose, and integrity to the body. As his body, his members have different functions according to the gifts that have been given. No one member or pastor today can claim to have final authority over others. Every believer has the Spirit of God. But God has manifested his Spirit differently in each member. He has given some roles of leadership, who are to patiently and gently guide God's people through the wilderness with the word of God. They are but servants in God's house. They are to function as a group (i.e. presbyters) each with equal authority. They are also accountable to one another and subject to evaluation in cases of dispute. The order of the NT church is quite similar to that established in the days of Moses (cf. Numbers 11).

One difference, however, was that Moses had a special role as a "typical" leader. He was a type of Christ. That is why Deuteronomy reveals that in the future, a prophet like Moses would arise again (Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22-23). This prophet is Christ. He speaks as one greater than all the prophets--even greater than the angels.

Their sin was not simply in violating the order of God's word in a general sense, but a failure to recognize Christ himself present in typical form. Moses was a servant in God's house. Jesus is the Son over the house.

And we who have believed are his house. The word he brings us is final, good, and true. He has the highest and final authority over us—not to domineer, but to serve and protect for our salvation. To reject that word means death. To resist it reveals an unclean heart (visibly manifested in the unclean appearance of Miriam). Like her, we are often rebellious. But where our sin abounds, God's grace abounds all the more, and we are again restored to God's blessed favor and presence.

Like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, we are weak vessels that contain the precious grace of God. Although God's presence in us is perfect, the receptacle is broken and imperfect. As Paul states, we have a treasure in jars of clay. As great as Moses was, he was not without his weaknesses. Although our weakness and sins may discourage us as we continually fall short of God's glory, they guarantee that in the end, all the glory will go to him.

Let us be thankful that in our weakness, God has still chosen to dwell among us. Despite our tendency to rebel against his word, he restores and cleanses us with his Spirit. Realizing the sufficiency of his power and provision, let us persevere through the wilderness of this world until we attain the rest and glory of the heavenly land above.

#13 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 13:1-33

This chapter contains the commissioning and report of the 12 spies whom God sent ahead of time into the land of Canaan. God's purpose was to ratify his promises to them in the midst of their struggles. As they begin to complain about their trials, the Lord shows mercy by reminding them that the tears of trouble will one day give way to the joy of dwelling safely in the promised land. However, it will not be without effort and difficulty.

The first part of the story identifies the names of the spies chosen from among the twelve tribes for this task. The two names that will be of lasting importance are Caleb (from Judah) and Hosea (from Ephraim). The latter is renamed "Joshua" by Moses. The two names are similar. "Hoshea" means "salvation," but "Joshua" expands this to "the Lord is salvation." The name change is significant as it reminds everyone that their faith must be in God himself. He is their only source of salvation and victory.

It is significant that only two of the spies end up giving a true and faithful report to the people. If we were to think of them as a committee erected for a special purpose by a congregation, the committee would have voted 87% against going into the land and only 13% for. There was an overwhelming supermajority against moving forward with the Lord's plan and going back to Egypt (see Num. 14:4). While clearly an overwhelmingly conclusion as far as the "democratic" process is concerned, it is also overwhelmingly rebellious against the Lord.

This is significant as it brings to culmination a growing (rebellious) attempt to transfer authority away from God and his divinely appointed leader to the people themselves. Aaron and Miriam opposed Moses, claiming that they, too, had a share of the same divine Spirit in Numbers 12. That spirit of rebellion spreads to the whole congregation. They are measuring their ability to succeed in the conquest by comparing their strength with that of the nations of Canaan. Overwhelmed with fear and a sense of their weakness, they are tempted to cut and run.

Here we see the "rub" of Israel's test of faith: will they trust in what they see, or in what they do not see? Will they trust in the affirmation they feel in the consensus of the group, or will they trust in the truth even if only held by a few?

The last few years have served as a reminder of how hard it is to stand against the "crowd." Basic moral and biological realities are being redefined, and these new definitions are being adopted by the most powerful institutions in our culture. They also increasingly have the backing of civil law in many areas. It is not just the specifics of the orthodox Christian faith that are being embraced by fewer and fewer people; it is also many basics of reality.

It is much easier to be a Christian when everything is being reinforced by your environment and the people around you. This is part of the reason corporate worship is so important. We are not to forsake the fellowship of the saints. Christian families, too, provide reinforcement for our faith.

But what will we do when we find ourselves alone? Will we trust in God's promises and word even if no one else does? Or will we value the affirmation of the crowd and the "group" more than the affirmation of God?

Moses, Caleb, and Joshua make a clear choice: their hope and strength will be in God. That is why among the Israelites, they are among the handful of people who actually make it to the Promised Land (Moses departing to the heavenly land just as they approach its earthly border).

When Christ came in the fullness of time, he walked in loneliness in his devotion to God. He selected a mere twelve disciples. All of them fled at his trial and crucifixion. Judas betrayed him, and Peter denied him. The crowds that had previously celebrated turned against him and joined in the cry to crucify him. He had only God in whom he could put his hope. He suffered the shame and rejection of the majority but passed through his wilderness trials when, in his resurrection and ascension, he crossed the great border between earth and heaven into the Promised Land above.

As followers of Jesus, we walk this same path. We know that the enemies of God are greater and stronger than we are. We fight not against Anakin but against the spiritual forces of evil in this present world. By ourselves, we are nothing and assured of certain defeat. But by the Spirit, we have One in us who is greater than he who is in the world. Through God's power, the victory is certain, for the war has already been won in Christ. He is our final "Joshua" (for that is the Hebrew version of the name "Jesus"), in whom alone we find our salvation.

#14 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 14:1-45

There are two realities that are fundamental to our redemption. They are helpfully summarized by the apostle Paul in Romans 5:20: "...where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." We see both principles vividly illustrated in this passage.

Clearly, Israel's sin is increasing. God showed mercy to them by giving them a foretaste of the Promised Land. He sent out twelve spies who could testify to the veracity of God's promise. They were heading out of the wilderness towards a good land, flowing with milk and honey. But God added a test to this: they would also see the nations they had to fight against. Instead of being strengthened in faith, they succumbed to fear. Instead of pressing forward to the freedom of the Promised Land, they earnestly desired to return to slavery in Egypt.

Instead of thanksgiving, the people were filled with lamentation and grumbling. In their earthly misery, they began to doubt God's good purpose for them. They rejected the leaders God had appointed. They exaggerated the misery of the moment and compared it to an artificially rosy picture of an idealized past they longed for. In these respects, there is a lot to learn here regarding the psychology of sin. Our tendency is to exaggerate the negativity of the moment and project it into the future. When we do this, we become overwhelmed with a sense of a hopeless future. This then drives us to return to a place in the past. This is the pattern of walking by sight in a world of misery. Israel is called to walk by faith.

By faith, they were to trust in the reality and blessedness of the land to which God was bringing them. They were not to fear the people of the land, for God had promised to bring them to destruction. The Lord was their strength. They ought not

to be dismayed by their weakness. Yet, Israel did not believe in the Lord: "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?" (Num. 14:11). The Mosaic covenant was a covenant of grace that called Israel to faith. God's fundamental desire is that His people trust Him in His loving provision and sufficiency, which He had been and will be for them.

Israel's sin and unbelief were abounding, and it would not be without judgment. That entire generation (except for Joshua and Caleb) would die in the wilderness. Israel would be defeated in battle. But where sin abounded, God's grace abounded all the more. When God's anger was kindled against them, Moses stood in the breach and made intercession for them. In his prayer, he appealed to the fame and glory of the Lord and the greatness of His steadfast love. In the fullness of time, we will see this prayer come to its fulfillment in the word of Jesus. Although Israel would express their unbelief to the fullest extent in the crucifixion of Jesus. On the cross, He would pray for the forgiveness of His persecutors. In this, He not only obtains pardon for His chosen people among Israel but procures redemption for His people among the nations. Thus, the word of God in Numbers 14:20-21 comes to fulfillment: "I have pardoned, according to your word. But truly, as I live... all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the LORD." At that time, that glory was revealed in God's judgment. Today it is revealed in salvation--and that to all the nations of the earth. The word of grace and salvation is proclaimed to every tribe, tongue, and people under heaven.

Like Israel, we are called to walk by faith. In this present time, we dwell in a wilderness, awaiting entrance into the Promised Land of heaven above. We will be tempted to think that our troubles are too great and that the temporary pleasures of sin are of greater worth than the unseen treasure of heaven. By His Spirit, God has already given us a down payment of the land of heaven above. He has given us a greater mediator in Jesus, who always lives in resurrected glory to make intercession for His people. By faith, we know that the sufferings of this present age are not worthy of being compared to the glory that will come. The devil promises relief from our present sufferings in the temporary pleasures of sin. He promises relief but delivers only tyranny and destruction. Let us, then, take up the full armor of God in our struggle against him, clinging to the promises of His word for direction, comfort, and strength. Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world.

#15 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 15:1-41

In previous devotionals we have seen how Israel's life in the wilderness is a pattern and example for our lives in the NT age. There is a parallel between us and them that is instructive in our spiritual lives, developed at length in passages like 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3-4. What we read here about Israel is also true of us in Christ. Not surprisingly, our troubles are not primarily found in the specific details of our circumstances, but in the general principles of salvation: sacrifice, consecration, devotion to God, trusting in him and persevering through hardship. As we read of Israel's struggles and God's mercy to them, we can apply directly to ourselves through our common union with Christ.

The previous chapters have contained a narrative with dramatic reminders of Israel's sinfulness. In spite of God's overwhelming and sufficient provision, they give in to their sinful cravings and fall into unbelief. Although God adds extra mercies to assist them in their weakness, this only exposes the depth of their hardness of heart. Judgment comes upon Israel, and the entire generation, save for Joshua and Caleb, will die in the wilderness.

Having emphasized Israel's sinfulness, the text now turns to a reminder of God's provision for forgiveness and reconciliation through sacrifice. Where sin abounds, grace will still superabound. Although this generation has rejected the Lord, the Lord has not fully rejected them.

The first part of the chapter contains a reminder of the whole scope of the sacrifices, from bloody burnt offerings to food offerings, to free-will offerings, etc. These indirectly remind Israel of the remnants of their sinfulness and also the perfection of God's holiness. Even unintentional sins contradict the glory and holiness of God and require atonement.

But what is specially emphasized here is the need to include a drink offering with the other sacrifices. It is noteworthy that this requirement seems to only kick in after they reach the land of promise.

What is significant about this? The drink offering had a unique imagery connected to it since it involved fluid that was being emptied and poured out from a vessel. The apostle Paul twice likens himself in his service to Christ to the drink offering (Phil. 2:17, 2 Tim. 4:6). In both cases, what is in view is not just a temporary time of service, but an exhaustive, comprehensive service that culminates in his expiration and death. He serves the Lord until he is empty and has nothing left in his cup.

This is a timely reminder for Israel. Because of their sin, they now have many years ahead of them to wander in the wilderness. God is reminding them that while there is still provision for the forgiveness of their sins, and therefore redemption, they must serve Him in faith all their days.

Interestingly, they are also reminded of their need to present the first of the bread of the land as a contribution to the Lord (17-21). From the first to the last, from the beginning to the end, they are to devote their lives to God. They are to live in thankfulness for His abundant provision for them. His consecration is comprehensive. All that they are and have belongs to him.

The chapter also contains a provision in which a Sabbath breaker is put to death. As the text makes clear, this was not the ordinary penalty for a violation of the Sabbath. Verse 34 indicates that "it had not been made clear" how to handle the situation. God, by a special, direct revelation, indicated that this violation needed to be punished with death.

That does not mean that every incident of Sabbath breaking in the OT was punished by death, and it certainly does not mean that the death penalty should be imposed for it today. There were certain circumstances that made this instance of Sabbath breaking particularly heinous. Not only was God visibly present among them, He did so in a pillar of fire. We can safely assume that the person was gathering sticks in order to kindle a fire to warm himself. While ordinarily, this could be construed as a work of necessity, God had promised His special presence and provision in other ways. For example, although food preparation is ordinarily a work of necessity on the Sabbath day, God had specially provided manna and given them direct instruction not to gather any on the Sabbath. Likewise, Israel had just sinned pretty

terribly. Offending again so quickly after a vivid reminder of God's holiness increases their culpability before God.

The Sabbath gave expression to the principle of "sacred time," which, in turn, was a reminder that while one day in seven was to be specially devoted to God's worship, it was representative of the whole life, which was to be dedicated to God's glory. It also connected them to their greater hope in the promised land, where they would receive a more permanent expression of rest.

Finally, the text contains a provision regarding tassels for the garments of the Israelites. These are to serve as a reminder of the Commandments of the Lord. They are to incline their hearts to keep and obey them and not follow the sinful desires of their hearts to "whore" after evil.

In different ways, all these provisions remind them of their consecration and devotion to God. They belong to Him. Every time, every act, every phase of their life is in some way to be devoted to His service. In both holy and common activities, they are to do everything to His glory and honor. Although they are not yet in the promised land, one day they will enter into a space that is also comprehensively holy to the Lord.

For now, they sojourn in the wilderness. Speaking in the spiritual terms of the New Testament, they are dual citizens: citizens of both earth and heaven. They have one foot in the wilderness and one foot in the promised land. They are engaged in a spiritual conflict. The remnants of their flesh and the world around them draw them to the kingdom of Satan, but God's word and the Holy Spirit are drawing them to heaven. Although the battle is filled with great difficulty and some defeat, God's grace will conquer all their sins.

#16 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 16:1-50

Rumbles of rebellion have already been afoot in the narrative so far. Miriam and Aaron opposed Moses, claiming a more "democratic" share in the Spirit of prophecy. The people also have complained, grumbled, and resisted the word of the Lord despite His gracious provision. He sent 12 spies into the land to ratify the veracity of His word and encourage His people to persevere. Yet all these things only revealed, in increasing measure, the hardness of their hearts.

In Numbers 14, this spirit of rebellion comes to climactic expression in the story of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. They concoct a plan of "resistance" that follows a typical pattern for divisive and destructive people. After forming a "core" group who will function as the center of power, they gather to themselves followers from among the discontent of Israel: 250 of the chiefs of the congregation. Previous attempts at resistance only included a handful of individuals (i.e., Aaron and Miriam). Now, a large group will make a similar attempt.

Shrewdly, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram cloak their power-hungry rebellion in the veneer of piety. They actually accuse Moses of the very thing they are guilty of: "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Num. 16:3).

This statement is shrewd on many levels. On the surface, it sounds pious and God-honoring. It paints the leaders of Israel (i.e., Moses and Aaron) as selfish and proud, pursuing their own gain and status. The opposite is, in fact, the case. Moses only reluctantly took up the position of leadership in Israel and was often so overburdened he pleaded with God to be relieved of it. And the real truth was that Korah and his companions were the ones pursuing selfish power. They had gone too far in rejecting God's chosen leaders through whom He promised to work despite their human weakness. Yet, Korah and his company succeeded in deceiving Israel to follow their plan. God's people should take careful note of the shrewdness and effectiveness of the devil in his strategies to divide and destroy the people of God.

But the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. God intervenes to expose and put a stop to the devil's work.

First, God makes it clear that the true object of their rebellion is not Moses and Aaron, but the Lord Himself. Korah was a Levite and was the recipient of special privileges and knowledge that made him especially culpable in his rebellion against God. God's word exposes the corrupt desires of his heart. Discontent with his service as a mere Levite, he desires the power and prestige of the high priesthood (16:10). In rejecting God's appointed servant, they are rejecting God Himself.

Second, even as Korah and his men seek to divide Israel against Moses, God makes His own division. After warning of their impending judgment, He warns the congregation to separate themselves from them. Behold the mercy of God to His people. They were manipulated by the evil one through Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Although their following them was a sin, God holds out mercy for them and an opportunity to repent.

Third, God administered judgment in a way that not only dealt justly with the evildoers but also ratified Moses as his servant-leader of Israel. It is through Moses's words that the prophetic judgment is announced (Num. 16:28). As soon as he had finished speaking, the ground beneath the rebels split apart, and the earth swallowed them up with all their possessions. The method of judgment reaffirmed Moses as their true leader even while it vindicated the justice of the Lord.

Yet, even after this, God's people still grumbled against Moses and Aaron. Although only the 250 followers of Korah perished in the initial judgment, it was clear that the spirit of unbelief had infected the whole congregation. 14,700 more perished in a plague of judgment sent by God. Yet, this too came to an end when God's provision of atonement through the priest placated the wrath of the Almighty.

The passage is sobering in that it serves as a warning for us. Look at how effectively the devil works to tempt, divide, and destroy his church even when special manifestations of his presence are evident. Israel lived in a time of miraculous divine activity. They had the pillar of cloud and fire, the face of Moses visibly reflecting the glory of the Lord, the wondrous works of God in the ten plagues of

Egypt, and God's powerful parting of the Red Sea. Apart from the powerful working of His Spirit in our hearts, these signs of God's power only work to expose our unbelief and the hardness of our hearts.

Thus, the NT gives a sober warning to us upon whom a greater revelation has come in Christ: "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God...that none of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). The reason they failed to enter the land was ultimately due to their unbelief. Good news has come to us just as to them, but the message did not benefit them because they had no faith (Heb. 4:2).

Let us then make every effort to preserve and grow in our faith. Let us be wise to the devil's strategies to provoke and promote our complaining and discontentment with God's provision. Let us cling to the promises of God's Word and the confidence that He will surely bring us safely to the Promised Land of heaven above.

#17 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 17

Numbers 17 records the story of the "budding" of Aaron's staff. Despite the grumbling and rebellion of God's people, he continues to show them his patience, love, and grace. The Lord truly is a God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

But before there can be a restoration of fellowship, there must be a cessation of sin. God has patiently and graciously made provision for them in their weakness and also relented from bringing full judgment upon them. Still, their rebellious hearts refused to humble themselves before him. They continually reject the Lord and the leaders he has appointed. Something must be done to put an end to the grumbling, complaining, and rebellion of God's people.

Moses anticipated this problem when God first called him to be the leader of Israel. By his power, he ratified Moses as a man of God through mighty miracles. In particular, you may recall how one of those miracles was done through his staff. When his staff was thrown on the ground, it would become a serpent. Once he picked it up by the tail, it would turn into a staff again. This miracle-staff would be a sign of God's favor and authority on his appointed leader (see Exodus 4:1-5).

Once again, God makes provision for another staff-miracle to bring holy order to the chaos of man's rebellion. The heads of each of the 12 tribes are to bring their staffs into the tent of meeting. Aaron's name is to be written on the staff of Levi. The staff of God's chosen leader will "sprout" or "bud" like a tree.

When all is done, according to the word of the Lord, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi sprouts with buds, blossoms, and even bears ripe almonds. Aaron's staff is kept back before the testimony as a sign to the rebels to put an end to their grumblings against the Lord.

The point of the passage is clear enough. It's hard to miss the message. Aaron is God's appointed high priest. He is to be respected as the leader of Israel. But there is

great significance in the symbolism of his budding and fruitful staff. Unlike with Moses, the staff is not turned into a snake. The serpent is connected in the Bible with judgment and the kingdom of darkness. Thus, the staff-miracle with Moses was a sign of God's power over the evil one. It ratified Moses as a leader but also prefigured his judgment over Pharaoh. Here the imagery is more positive. Through God's appointed leader, fruitfulness will come. Just as the tabernacle contains reminders of the paradise garden of heaven above, so also does the budding, blossoming, and fruit-bearing staff of Levi.

It also serves indirectly as a reminder of what happened in the report of the 12 spies. Recall that they brought back to the congregation of Israel a branch with a single cluster of grapes, as well as some pomegranates and figs. The fruit-bearing branch was a sign to them of the veracity of God's word. It was a sign to them that not only did that promised land exist, but that they were already enjoying its firstfruits through the promise and provision of God.

Ultimately, this sprouting staff in the hand of the high priest was a sign that a greater deliverance and deliverer would come. It was through God's high priest, who could stand as a mediator between a holy God and his sinful people, that redemption would come. Sinful man has been cast out of God's Paradise-Garden to dwell in a wilderness wasteland. Even where the earth resembles the garden, like the fruitfulness of Eden, spiritually speaking, it is a barren wasteland of godlessness and death. This is perhaps most vividly seen in Sodom and Gomorrah. Outwardly it reminded one of the Garden of Eden, but spiritually it was a pit of depravity.

Jesus is God's final high priest. Through him, an offering has been made sufficient to pay the infinite debt of our sins. He became flesh and tabernacled among us. He dwells in the wilderness of this world, vividly seen in his temptation by the devil in the wilderness. Where Israel rebelled against the Lord and gave in to their sinful cravings, Jesus succeeded by resisting the tempter's snares. He went hungry and thirsty in this life, living in self-denial for the sake of his people. He did not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. But he now dwells in heaven, in the paradise of God. He has sent his Holy Spirit to be the down payment and guarantee of our inheritance. That Spirit works in our hearts to sanctify us, putting to death the sinful, rebellious heart in each one of us, that we may bow the knee in total consecration and service to our Savior.

#18 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 18:1-32

Numbers 18 shifts gears once again. This section of the book has been characterized by a movement between a narrative story of Israel followed by sections regarding ritual laws. For example, from Numbers 11-14, we read the story of the Israelites' complaining, Miriam and Aaron opposing Moses, the report of the 12 spies, and the rebellion of the people. This is followed by a single chapter outlining laws about various sacrifices and other ritual laws (Num. 15). The point is clear: Israel's sin will come to God's judgment, but there is still provision for mercy and forgiveness through the sacrifices.

The same pattern repeats itself in chapters 16-17. We first have a narrative story of Korah's rebellion (Num. 16), followed by the story of the "budding" of Aaron's staff. This is followed by a chapter on ritual laws, this time focused on the role of Aaron the priest. Much of what is said here is a repetition of what we can find elsewhere in the Mosaic law. But its inclusion at this point in Numbers is strategic and has much to teach God's people.

First, it serves to reinforce the role of Aaron as God's appointed leader. Korah and his company had issued a direct challenge to both Moses and Aaron. There is a tinge of irony in this, as Aaron had previously issued a similar challenge to Moses. Now he is getting a taste of his own medicine! Korah shrewdly accuses them of overstepping their bounds, exalting themselves above God's people, and taking too much power for themselves. There certainly are times when corrupt leaders pursue leadership to advance their power. More often than not, men accept leadership positions reluctantly, knowing that such positions are not about power but responsibility. Bold rebukes against tyrannical men are admirable and necessary. But misplaced accusations against humble, God-fearing men who are patiently serving the Lord can feel like a real gut punch. Such was Moses: the meekest man on the face of the earth. The irony was that it was Korah and his company who were "going too far," rejecting God's appointed servants to grab power for themselves.

How shrewd the devil is! One of his favorite tactics is to accuse others of the very things of which he is guilty. And so during the trial of Jesus he is accused of "blasphemy" by the elders of Israel. Or Judas (the thief) implies that Christ has

insufficient concern for the poor in allowing Mary to anoint him with expensive perfume.

By positioning this chapter right after Korah's rebellion, God is making it clear that Aaron is his appointed High Priest. To be sure, he had been appointed in his weakness. It was God's power, not his, that was the source of his position and authority.

Secondly, this chapter is a reminder that God's people need a priest to approach him. Both here and in chapter 12, the rebellion against God's appointed leaders cloaks itself in a more "democratic" philosophy. Moses and Aaron are not the only ones who have received the Spirit of prophecy (Num. 12). God's congregation is also holy and set apart for the Lord. Why should Moses and Aaron claim exclusive privileges above God's people (Num. 16:3)?

This formal appeal to the democratization of Israel's worship to God actually masked the pride of sin. God's people are, indeed, holy to the Lord. But only through the work of a priest who offers a blood sacrifice on their behalf. Likewise, it is through the priestly intercession of Moses that the people are saved from utter destruction.

No sinner can approach God on their own. We must have a representative and a substitute who can appear before God on our behalf. In this way, the passage typologically expresses the doctrine of salvation through Christ alone. He is the one mediator between God and man and the only name under heaven by which men may be saved.

#19 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 19:1-22

This passage contains various laws for purification after contact with a dead body.

It begins with a procedure involving the sacrifice of a red heifer, which results in a substance used in the process of this ritual purification. The heifer must be red, likely because of its resemblance to the color of blood. The ashes of the heifer are to be kept for the water for impurity for the congregation of Israel. Touching a dead body meant that the person would be unclean for seven days, after which he would go through a process of ritual cleansing with water. Failure to do so meant that he would be cut off from the congregation of Israel.

Likewise, if someone died in a tent, everyone in that tent would be similarly unclean. These provisions applied to everyone who had died, whether naturally or in times of war. Even touching a human bone or a grave would render one unclean for seven days. This provision served as a vivid reminder of the ugly fruit of sin. Death was unclean because of its connection to the impurity of evil. Sin leads to the sentence of condemnation and, finally, the punishment of death.

At this point in Israel's history, sin and death are all around them.

The rebellion of Korah resulted in the death of the 250 men in his company and also 14,700 who were punished in the plague. After this chapter, we will read of the death of Miriam and the death of Aaron. Death thus comes to all men, whether leader or layperson in the congregation. Although God had revealed His life-giving provision through the work of the priest and the offering of sacrifice, this was of no benefit to them unless they embraced it by true and living faith. Save for a handful, that entire generation died in the wilderness and did not enter the promised land.

But Numbers 19 reminds us that, although this generation was largely a failure of faith, the provision for redemption was not a failure. In the fullness of time, Jesus

would come as our final high priest. He would assume our human nature, coming in the likeness of sinful flesh, yet without sin.

Throughout His ministry, He would touch human death. Note how in the Gospels several of His resurrection miracles involve His touching the dead person. In Mark 5, we read the story of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter from the dead.

The text dramatically describes Him entering the house with people weeping and wailing in grief. With the child's father and mother present, along with Peter, James, and John, the text tells us: "Taking her by the hand, He said to her, 'Talitha, Cumi,' which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, arise'" (Mark 5:41).

Against the background of Numbers 19, the implication is clear. Jesus has touched death. He has touched our uncleanness.

He is our final high priest and sacrifice. He touches our death, our sickness, our suffering, our misery, and even our sin. Not that He ever committed any wrongdoing. Instead, He vicariously bore our sins in His body on the tree.

Neither Moses nor Aaron could be such a high priest. As the book of Hebrews indicates, the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer could only sanctify for the purification of the flesh. But the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purifies our consciences from dead works to serve the living God (Heb. 9:13-14).

This passage is a reminder that the core problem we face is quite simple. We are sinners. We are unclean in our thoughts, words, and deeds. We need a spiritual cleansing that can penetrate to the heart and core of the source of evil within us. That can only come through the blood of Christ and His eternal spirit. Through His work, we are delivered from the uncleanness of death and eternal destruction. We are brought by grace into fellowship with the Triune God and the blessedness of the promised land of heaven above.

The assurance that in Christ, we have been fully and completely cleansed by faith, is at the foundation of our Christian lives. We cannot do anything for God until we realize the full extent of what He has done for us. The one who has been forgiven much loves much. We face many obstacles in our inner spiritual lives to consistently living in the fullness of this reality. In Christ, we can approach His throne of grace with confidence, knowing that He will provide everything necessary for us in our time of need.

#20 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 20:1-29

Numbers 20 begins and ends on very somber notes. In verse one, we read of the death of Miriam. Miriam was the sister of Aaron, who had also been given the gift of prophecy. She sang a song of victory after the destruction of the Egyptians in the waters of the Red Sea. But later, she and her brother Aaron opposed Moses. Their "rebellion" planted a seed of unbelief in the whole people, evident both in Israel's unfaithfulness after the report of the spies and later the rebellion of Korah.

The chapter ends with the record of the death of her brother. Because of his unbelief, he also will not enter the land but die in the wilderness. Aaron is also stripped of his priestly garments, which are transferred to his son Eleazar.

Sin, death, and unbelief surround the chapter, just as these realities also surround the people of God.

Between these reminders of death are episodes of further unbelief and divine judgment.

After the death of Miriam, Israel comes to a place where there is no water for the congregation. They repeat their previous complaint, expressing a longing to return to Egypt. They claim that Moses (and through him, God) has been untruthful and unfaithful to his promise. Instead of a land with figs, vines, and pomegranates, they are in a desert with not even water to drink.

Their mindset is an example of a pattern against which we should stand guard. The apostle Paul tells us that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is to come. If we are to have a comparative mindset, it is always to be between the things that God has promised us in the future and the trials in the present. When this comparison is made, the current trouble is minimized. Paul speaks of the present time as "light and momentary affliction" compared to an eternal weight of glory (2 Cor. 4:17). The apostle Peter tells us that now, for a little

while, we must suffer trials, but we await an inheritance that is eternal in the heavens (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

But this approach requires faith. We must measure the value and greatness of what is unseen against what we can see.

The mindset of the Israelites is quite the opposite. They compare their present misery to a rose-colored memory of the past. They would rather go back to Egypt than die in the wilderness. They have quickly forgotten that their sufferings in Egypt were so great that they cried out with great groanings for deliverance before the Lord (Exodus 2:23). Israel's mindset represents a pattern of walking by sight and not by faith.

In this approach, what we feel in the moment takes precedence over everything else. In this case, the suffering of the present time becomes so overwhelming that we can no longer properly assess the sufferings of the past, much less see clearly enough to draw strength from the glory of the future. Instead of looking to heaven by faith to draw strength in the present, we look to the immediate pleasure of sin (cf. Heb. 11:25)

In response, God performs another miraculous sign through Moses. Moses is to take his staff and speak to the rock, which will yield water for the congregation. By his divine power, God will quench their thirst. But in this instance, the miracle serves more as a manifestation of divine judgment against their unbelief. After all, this is not the first time they have beheld with their very eyes signs of God's infinite power to save and sustain his people. Yet instead of praise and thanksgiving, they are still filled with complaints.

Moses, also, begins to manifest his human weakness. God had commanded him to speak to the rock, but in his frustration with the people, he struck the rock twice. Water still comes out, but not in the way God had intended. Speaking to the rock would have shown more clearly that the water came from God's supernatural power through his word. Striking the rock was not only an expression of Moses' anger; it also perhaps gave the impression that it was his human activity that produced the

water. Although Moses himself is clearly a recipient of eternal salvation, this act of unfaithfulness will keep him from entering the earthly promised land.

Finally, the text includes a story regarding the Edomites, who refused safe passage for the Israelites through their land. The Edomites, who are the sons of Esau, the brother of Jacob. While they had been in opposition for most of their lives, the Genesis narrative records how they were eventually reconciled and at peace with one another. Like the intensity of Israel's sufferings in Egypt, their memory of this reconciled peace is absent to the king of Edom. Edom refuses passage for Israel, and they must turn away from them.

This passage is not only a reminder of the perils of unbelief; it also serves to show that the leaders of the Exodus generation, as great as they were, were not God's final saviors.

In the fullness of time, one greater than Moses would arise. Moses was a servant in God's house, but Jesus is a son over God's house. He would also become for us a merciful and faithful high priest. Unlike Aaron, who was unfaithful and suffered death, putting an end to his priesthood, Jesus has risen from the dead. He holds his priesthood permanently and always lives to make intercession for us.

And unlike Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, he truly did enter God's promised land: not the earthly land of Palestine, but the heavenly land of glory above. Jesus came to give us the water of life. We, who drink from him by faith, receiving his spirit, will never get thirsty again. These waters well up within us for everlasting life. For now, we dwell in this earthly wilderness, but we do so wise to the perils of unbelief and how weak we can become in the midst of trial. But we have the fullest manifestation of God's divine power available to us in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. By faith, we are filled with the assurance of these things, such that we can endure the trials and misery of this life, not comparing them to some past glory we used to possess on this earth, but to the future glory reserved in heaven for us. Unlike Israel in her unbelief, we will be given safe passage through his divine power through the wilderness of this earth. He will rescue us from every trial until we complete the earthly task he has given to us.

#21 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 21:1-35

In Exodus 34:6-7, God declares, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."

This verse reveals God's glorious nature in a condensed and helpful way. He is both merciful and just, a God of forgiveness as well as vengeance. He pardons sin but does not clear the guilty.

In this passage, we see these two aspects of the divine nature manifested to his people Israel. We witness Israel's continued sin and rebellion, but also God's continued faithfulness to his chosen people.

The chapter begins and ends with the defeat of some Canaanite kings. The king of Arad attacks Israel in a preemptive strike, and in response, Israel makes a vow to the Lord, trusting in his power and promise of victory. In return, Israel promises to devote the kings and their people to complete destruction. Later, Israel defeats Sihon, the king of the Amorites, and Og of Bashan. Israel requests safe passage from Sihon, but he refuses and assembles his forces against Israel, only to be defeated in battle. Similarly, Og is defeated, and Israel takes possession of his cities and lands.

These stories serve as a reminder of God's unfailing love for his people. Although this generation of Israel is destined to remain outside the Promised Land, these victories over the Canaanite kings on the fringes of Israel's territory remind them that despite their unfaithfulness, God will remain faithful to his promises.

These victories hold significance in the life of Israel and are celebrated long after the fact in various Psalms (see Psalm 135-136). While Israel does not possess the fullness of God's promise, they receive a taste of it.

Similarly, we live "between the times." We still await the fullness of God's promised land, yet we experience the firstfruits of victory through the Holy Spirit, who serves as the down payment of our inheritance. Due to our weakness and the remnants of sin in us, we may fall into failure. God's fatherly displeasure may come upon us for a time, but his wrath will not overwhelm us or bring us to a complete end. His anger lasts for a moment, but his favor for a lifetime.

Amidst the stories of victory over the Canaanite kings, there is a reminder of Israel's continued weakness. Despite God's mighty works and abundant mercies, they still fall into discontentment and complaint. They accuse God of leading them out of slavery only to let them die in the wilderness. They shift the blame for their misery from themselves to God, claiming it is his fault they are suffering. Their complaint contradicts itself as they simultaneously state that there is no food while whining that the food God provided is worthless and loathsome. In mercy, God provides water for his people, as commemorated in the "Song of the Well" outlined in verses 10-20.

Yet, this time, the complaint is accompanied by a confession of sin, but only after God sends fiery serpents that bite and kill some of the people. The threat of death becomes a deterrent to their unbelief. God provides a way of escape through a bronze serpent lifted up on a pole. Whoever is bitten and looks to this serpent will be saved and live.

Our Lord Jesus reveals that this was a symbol and type of himself in his redeeming work. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up. Everyone who looks to the Son will be saved, and whoever believes in him will have eternal life (John 3:14-15). Ironically, this same bronze serpent will later be destroyed because the Israelites worshipped it as an idol (2 Kings 18:4). God's power to save was revealed through types and shadows, but he never embedded his power in them with some kind of "magical" force.

Salvation comes through Christ alone. We must repent and sincerely confess our sins to God while simultaneously looking to Christ and apprehending forgiveness

and mercy in him. We embrace Christ as the "lifted up" Son of Man. This means that we embrace suffering in this sinful world, knowing that God will work through it to purify our faith and direct our attention more fully to the Promised Land of Heaven above. The temptation to indulge in bitter complaining is very strong—as strong as the miseries we often experience. In these moments of trial, we can look to our faithful Savior who endured humiliation and suffering to the point of death—even the death of the cross. He will give us victory over all our enemies. Having suffered as we do, he has a heart of compassion towards us and always lives to make intercession for us. Although we may be tried and tested, he has prayed that our faith may not fail (cf. Luke 22:32). The intercession of Jesus is greater than that of Moses. Our lives today are a mixture of spiritual victories and defeats, but through Jesus, we can be certain that the last enemy will be destroyed beneath his feet. We will make it safely to the Promised Land.

#22 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 22:1-41

Numbers 22 begins a somewhat enigmatic section of the book, which contains the oracles of Balaam. Balaam was a pagan seer who practiced divination. Think of him as a kind of false "prophet for hire" who claimed to be able to cast magical spells or pronounce curses with the power of the gods. Balak, the king of Moab, had heard of all that the Israelites had done to neighboring kings like Og and Sihon, and the country was filled with fear. Balak decides to call upon Balaam for some extra help.

Divination is still practiced today, even in developed Western countries. Palm reading, seances with the dead, and other superstitious nonsense make fraudsters a lot of money every year. I have no doubt that 99% of the people who "practice" these things know full well they are committing fraud. This is probably why it is usually qualified as being for "entertainment purposes only" in their fine print. Yet people are born with a sense of the divine. They know that there is a God who is infinitely powerful. So they manipulate this sense for their own enrichment. This is not to deny the presence and reality of demonic forces. Satan himself is a fallen angel. The presence of demons is clearly attested in Jesus's exorcism miracles and, in a more general way, the letters of Paul. But the power of superstition is also a part of how Satan manifests his influence over this world of darkness. Balak understands that with his people filled with fear, they are in an extremely vulnerable position. They believe that their defeat is inevitable. To quell their fears, he attempts to call upon Balaam to curse God's people. At the very least, this may convince some of the people that there is some divine power on their side and restore in them some measure of "fighting spirit."

The trouble is that Balaam refuses to answer the call. The pagan seer declares, "The Lord has refused to let me go with you" (22:13). Balak sends a second time, and Balaam still refuses, saying, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God to do less or more" (22:18). This pagan's acknowledgment of the authority of the one true God is an amazing thing.

Balaam finally relents and goes with the princes, but he is met by the angel of the Lord with a drawn sword in his hand. At first, only the donkey can see the angel. Yet

God's will has clearly been made known to Balaam. The angels are messengers and servants of God sent to execute His will. Although Balaam wanted to try to continue on his journey in defiance of God's will, the donkey refuses, even after multiple beatings. Sometimes beasts have greater wisdom than men. The angel is equipped and ready to strike down both man and beast. The beast, at least, fears death. Man will knowingly run headlong into destruction to satisfy his rebellious impulses. Such is the nature of sinful man that beasts sometimes surpass him in wisdom. And so the Lord opens the mouth of the donkey as a sign against him. Balaam has become like an unreasoning animal following brute instinct to his own destruction (cf. 2 Pet. 2:12; Jude 10).

Incidentally, the scene has parallels with other events in redemptive history. Recall the devil speaking through an animal (i.e., a snake) in Eden. Likewise, the angels appear with flaming swords to guard the entrance to the garden. The patterns and signs of rebellion are present once again, thus reinforcing the message of the chapter.

After Balaam sees the angel, he again acknowledges the divine power of the one true God and "repents." Through the angel, God allows him to move forward on his journey, but only to speak the exact words he is told. When he arrives before Balak, he reiterates that he is bound to speak only what God allows him.

The overall message of the passage is that God's divine power is such that He can use the very forces that oppose Him to advance His purposes. He can speak through brute beasts as well as pagan seers.

In the fullness of time, we see this pattern repeated in the life of Jesus. When the promised star arises to mark the place of His birth, the scribes of Israel remain dormant. But the pagan astrologers journey thousands of miles across the desert to seek out the One born King of the Jews. It is quite possible that Balaam's Messianic oracle (Num. 24:17) is the source of their Messianic expectation.

Likewise, in the life of Jesus, the prophets and leaders of Israel rebel against the Lord to declare Jesus guilty and accursed. God still speaks through them, turning

their rebellion into a means to advance His purposes of salvation. With evil motive and intent, Caiaphas prophesied regarding the death of Jesus. But John reveals that this only happened because of the greater will of God: "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:51-52).

In the great war between the will of our holy God and the will of sinful man, God will always have the victory. All His enemies will bow the knee. Some will do so as friends and subjects, having been graciously reconciled to Him by faith in the blood of Jesus. Others will bow forcibly through God's power and might. But nothing can stand against the word of God.

That word is one of blessing to His people. Although the devil may seek to pronounce a curse, his efforts will fail before the mighty word of the Lord. That word of blessing has come to us in Christ. It has been pronounced not by an earthly priest but by our heavenly Savior. This blessing is not a mere wish of good favor but a powerful declaration that will remain upon us as long as we dwell in the wilderness of this earth and abide with us forever in heaven.

We need not fear any human enemy or even the devil himself. All the forces of evil are under the control of our exalted Savior. Even the wrath of man shall praise Him. All that they mean for evil, God will work for our good. We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

#23 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 23:1-30

Numbers 23 continues the story of Balaam. The ESV enumerates only four oracles in their (uninspired) chapter headings. Others count a total of seven, including the three smaller oracles in Numbers 24:20-24 with the four earlier ones. Viewing this as a total of seven oracles would fit the pattern of seven we see throughout the narrative, particularly where Balaam builds seven altars on which a bull and ram are offered. The number seven obviously denotes the number of fullness. Despite the "full" attempts of Balak to curse Israel, the power of man is shown to be impotent against the power of God.

Ironically, Balak's attempt to have Balaam pronounce a curse against Israel actually produces the opposite effect. Balaam is unable to speak anything but a word of blessing. The fullness of curse thus becomes a fullness of blessing through the grace and power of God.

In the first oracle, Balaam makes it very clear that he cannot fulfill Balak's orders, recognizing that there is a higher authority to which he must be subjected: "How can I curse whom God has not cursed? How can I denounce whom the Lord has not denounced?" (Num. 23:8). Although he only sees a part of the nation assembled in the wilderness, he also makes a point of noting how numerous they are. "Who can count the dust of Jacob or number the fourth part of Israel?" (Num. 23:10).

Again, God reveals His almighty power over the pagan nations. Think of Balaam as the prophetic equivalent of the toughest fighter in the world. No one wants to step in the ring with him. The only thing you can be assured of is defeat. Yet, here this great champion cannot even speak a word against God's people. He can only speak the word that God put into his mouth.

There is great irony in this. The pagan prophet recognizes the power of God and will not go against it, even though he neither loves nor worships Him. The demons also recognize the power of the Son of God, and although they hate Him, they back down when His word is spoken. Yet, how often God's own people refuse to listen. How often God's own spokesmen fail to preach the word He has given them.

In the second oracle, Balak lowers the stakes a little bit. He takes Balaam to a different place where he would see a smaller number of Israel. Perhaps this curse would be easier and actually take hold, although upon a smaller number of the nation.

The second oracle reinforces the unchangeable character of God and the veracity of His word: "God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should change His mind" (Num. 23:19). He has pronounced an irrevocable blessing upon the nation. They have already defeated the great world power of the era when God brought them out of Egypt. They are like a lion or lioness and will succeed in accomplishing God's divine purpose for them. No word can be spoken against them when God has spoken a word for them.

After this, Balak lowers the stakes once again. Rather than cursing them or blessing them, he asks Balaam simply to say nothing at all. Once again, Balaam recognizes the greatness of the power of God, confessing, "All that the Lord says, that I must do" (Num. 23:26).

Again, there is great irony in this statement. Balaam's words mirror the covenant-oath of Israel: "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do" (Ex. 24:7; Deut. 5:22). What the recipients of His grace refused to fulfill, the pagan prophet is forced to perform.

This passage is not only a sign against Israel in their unbelief and idolatry, but it is also a foretaste of a greater work that God would do in the future. In the fullness of time, the Savior would come, bringing a prophetic word not only to the Jews but to all nations of the earth. They will come to Him in humble submission, not simply subdued by His raw power, but as recipients of His grace and mercy.

In Christ, a prophetic word of blessing will be spoken to His people. And in Christ, it is a blessing that can never be revoked. Before Christ ascended into heaven, Jesus blessed His people. The apostolic letters reiterate this blessedness that attaches itself to the people of God. Every worship service also ends with a pronouncement of

blessing. This blessing is not an empty word or simply a "wish" of goodwill and prosperity. It is a divine word that irrevocably attaches itself to us.

Although the devil may curse us, his words will be of no effect. Although in our own wilderness wanderings, we will have trials and difficulties, pain and sorrow will at times accompany us. But by the power of God's word, He has transformed all these things to work for our blessing and good. He has offered a full and final sacrifice for sins. He has pronounced a final, authoritative word to his beloved people. No power in heaven or on earth can stand against it.

#24 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 24:1-25

Numbers 24 continues the story of the oracles of Balaam. In this chapter, we read the third and fourth oracles, which build upon the previous two. The story continues to accentuate the almighty power of God's word over the powers of man. No force of the earth can stand against the heavenly might of God. No word of man can contradict the blessed word of God.

In the last chapter, we saw that King Balak continued to lower the stakes with each attempt at cursing Israel. We've moved from an attempt to curse the entire nation to only a part of it. If you can't cut off the snake's head, you might as well try to strike part of the tail. Even here, the efforts end in failure.

Balaam is getting the message. He no longer even tries to look for omens with which to curse Israel but sets his face towards the wilderness. His third oracle begins spontaneously at the instigation of the Spirit of God upon him. His eyes have been opened to see the power of God behind the nation of Israel. He has been given the ability to see what King Balak cannot, and therefore, he cannot help but bless Israel. God's people are like lions; they are at the top of the food chain. Whatever they seek to devour, they will destroy by God's power. They will eat up the nations the way a lion devours its prey. Despite Israel's failures and faithlessness, God's faithfulness abides forever.

At this point, Balaam sees that all of his endeavors are counterproductive. His efforts to harm Israel actually turn out for their good. This is a pattern we see throughout redemptive history. In our series on the book of Acts, we've seen this manifestation of God's power over and over again. Nothing can thwart the purposes of God. All energy expended to stop the spread of God's word will be rechanneled to help its spread. The waters the devil uses to douse the flame of the Gospel will be transformed into a flammable liquid that only increases its spread. Although the forces of evil may seek to curse God's church, He will turn them all for good.

The fourth oracle takes on a slightly different, future-focused tone. The previous prophecies focused on Israel present status as the blessed nation of God. The shift to a future orientation is signaled the unique use of the phrase "the latter days" (Num. 24:14). This phrase indicates that the oracle will stretch beyond Israel's present situation in the wilderness and more clearly encompass their future hope of final redemption. It signals that Balaam is about to utter a prophecy that is Messianic in focus. The "latter days" is the Old Testament way of referring to the time of fulfillment inaugurated by the Lord Jesus Christ and His coming.

This oracle describes a singular individual who will arise as a king. He is likened to a star and a scepter. Combined with the previous imagery of a lion in the previous oracle, the scepter image recalls the blessing of Jacob on the tribe of Judah (Genesis 49:9-10). However, the star image is unique and likely provides the backdrop for the Magi's visit at the Messiah's birth, represented by the Messianic star (Matt. 2:2).

This Messianic Savior is beheld by Balaam, albeit from afar. We see him now who has truly drawn near in his incarnation, death, and resurrection. He now rules over all the nations, and no one can stand against the blessing that flows from the sway of His kingdom.

We who believe know this Savior: the Lord Jesus Christ. He not only directly fulfills Balaam's Messianic prophecy in Numbers 24:17 but accomplishes the fullness of the work that was typified in Balaam's oracles. In Christ, all efforts to curse become a blessing. He accomplished this in His work for us. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. In His crucifixion and death, He also became a curse for us, for it is written: "cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Gal. 3:10, 13). Jesus has borne the greatest curse of all: the curse of a holy God against the evil of sin.

In His death on the cross, Jesus turns curse into blessing. Through His bearing of the curse, the blessing of the Spirit comes upon His chosen people, not only from among the camp of Israel but also the Gentiles. In Christ, sin becomes righteousness through our justification. Impurity is cleansed in sanctification. Death becomes life in our regeneration and future resurrection. What was foretold by Balaam's

prophecy and foreshadowed in his activity is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

#25 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 25:1-18

The book of Numbers is characterized by a number of jarring contrasts. There is a stark difference between the faithfulness of the Lord and the unfaithfulness of His people. The greatness of God's grace is set over against the greatness of Israel's rebellion. God offers life to His people, but they run headlong into death. God portrays His perfect purity through the holiness of the priesthood and the tabernacle, while Israel continually displays the impurity and evil of sin.

The previous chapters recorded the amazing story of Balaam and Balak and their repeated attempts to speak against the people of God. Despite their rebellion, God turned all their attempts at cursing into a seven-fold blessing. Although temporary judgment will come upon the nation, eternal salvation will arise for them in the future. A star will arise from Jacob. A lion will come forth from Judah. A scepter will come forth from Israel. He will bring victory and salvation for God's people. Whatever their temporary failures, permanent success will come through Him.

Chapter 25 is a reminder that while the coming of this Savior is certain, His arrival is "not now," and His coming is "not near" (see Num. 24:17). It records several instances of sin and rebellion on the part of God's people, along with God's subsequent judgment.

First, the Israelites commit sexual immorality with the daughters of Moab. Israel was forbidden to intermarry with the foreign nations. The concerns were not ethnic or racial, much less a matter of skin color. The prohibition was religious in motivation. The concern was not to keep a bloodline pure, but to maintain a pattern of religious faith and worship.

Second, this sexual intermingling leads to the adoption of the Moabites' idolatrous practices. They begin to sacrifice and worship Baal, and even "yoke" themselves to him (25:3). Baal worship was both violent and sexually perverse. It was characterized by child sacrifice and cult prostitution. It was not simply a matter of aligning with a different denomination or a slightly different worship "style." To

yoke oneself to Baal was rank idolatry that was an offense to a holy God and involved physical abuse of fellow men.

The subsequent punishments of Israel must be understood against this background. The chiefs of Israel are put to death, and Phineas the priest executes a man with his Midianite wife near the entrance to the tent of meeting. God had previously declared His judgment against the very sin they had committed, and even administered it publicly in the presence of all. Keep in mind that all these things were done when the God of Israel was visibly present in the pillar of cloud and fire. To re-offend after this is to show total disregard for God and His holiness. Unfortunately, this attitude was prevalent among the whole congregation. After their execution, the plague of judgment among Israel ceases but not before killing 24,000 among them. God is merciful. He has often shown Himself to be patient and gracious, but He is also just and will by no means clear the guilty.

Phineas, who served as the administrator of God's just judgment, is commended for his jealous zeal for the Lord. Note particularly that his commendation involves his making "atonement" for the people of Israel. This is a reminder that in the midst of judgment, God's salvation still shines forth.

Indeed, without judgment, there is no salvation. While this passage is a sobering reminder of the justice of God against sin, it also reveals the love and mercy of God. Our sin deserves death, and God's wrath must be satisfied. There is no escape from the punishment of sin.

In Christ, we have a sacrifice and a priest who is greater than Eleazar. Zeal for God's house consumed Him. Even as He cleared out the idolatry of Israel, He offered Himself as the sacrifice that would placate the wrath of God. In His resurrection, He confirmed the perpetual character of His priesthood and the continuing efficacy of His redeeming love for His people.

In His blood, we have redemption. Our sins are forgiven, and our hearts are cleansed. The old man is crucified, and the body of sin is brought to nothing. In Christ, we become wise to the lure of temptation—especially the deceptiveness of

sexual perversity. It promises a sense of vitality and life but only delivers destruction and death. In Christ, we are purified, and our rebellious hearts are subdued. We willingly follow Him wherever He might lead: through the wilderness, suffering, trial, and even death. Christ has conquered all His and our enemies. In Him, irrevocable blessing is pronounced upon us and will remain with us until the end of the age.

#26 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 26:1-65

In Numbers 26, we approach the end of the book. The last section is upon us. As we begin the book, so we end it. Chapter 26 contains the 2nd census of the nation of Israel. It counts the number of able-bodied men, 20 years old and upward, who are able to go to war.

When we compare this to the first census in chapter 1, a few things stand out.

First, the Israelites are diminished in number. In Numbers 1, Israel begins its journey in the wilderness with 603,550 people (Num. 1:46). Now they are 601,730 (Num. 26:51). That may seem like a small decline, but when we recall how quickly they multiplied during their stay in the land of Egypt, we can see that this is not a positive sign. Population declines are generally the result of trouble and calamity, whether economic declines, disease, famine, or war. We know from the narrative that their numerical diminishment was ultimately the result of their unbelief and the judgment of God.

Second, not every tribe sees a decrease in population. The tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Gad, and Ephraim go down in population. Simeon sees the biggest drop: from 59,300 to 22,200. Ephraim and Naphtali also fall by 8,000 each. Sprinkled among these tribal enumerations are reminders of incidences of rebellion and unbelief. Dathan and Abiram came from the tribe of Reuben and were swallowed up with Korah. Even a tribe like Judah that sees an increase is reminded of previous negative incidences in earlier eras, such as Er and Onan.

However, the tribes of Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, and Asher see an increase. It is noteworthy that the tribes that camp to the east with Judah all see an increase. Judah was the tribe from which the Savior would come. This is an indication of God's special preserving blessing upon the royal tribe.

Also, the largest increases come to the smallest tribes. Manasseh increases by over 20,000. Benjamin by 10,000. These were "younger" tribes and lower in the birth order. On the other hand, Simeon is the second born and sees the largest diminishment from 59,300 to 22,200. The older are served by the younger. The humble are exalted and the exalted are humbled.

Note also that this final census has significant ramifications. The population of the tribes at this point in history will affect the allotment of the land. The larger tribes will get a larger inheritance, and vice versa (26:55). In this, we see a manifestation of the principle of proportional reward as articulated by Jesus (cf. Luke 19:11-27).

Also, just as before, the tribe of Levi is not counted among the others. They were set apart for the Lord's service. They did not have a land inheritance in Israel because they were scattered among the twelve tribes to minister and teach the ways of the Lord. They served as a reminder that their ultimate inheritance was in a better country—that is, a heavenly one.

Like the other chapters, this section is a reminder of both the justice and grace of God. We see His justice in that the entire Exodus generation (save for a handful) did not enter the Promised Land but died in the wilderness (26:63-65). The Lord their God was a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But even here, we see His judgment tempered with grace. In His mercy, He allows the nation to remain intact despite their unbelief and does not punish the children for the sins of their fathers.

Ultimately, the preservation of the nation serves the preservation of God's Messianic promise. It is from the womb of Israel that the Messiah would come. To bring an end to the nation would be to bring an end to God's plan of salvation for the nations. In the fullness of time, Jesus would come. Tempted and tested in the wilderness, He would not fall into sin and unbelief. He would deal a fatal blow to the serpent, fully executed on the cross. In His resurrection, He would take possession of the promised inheritance by entering into heaven on our behalf. He now gathers His chosen people from the four corners of the earth. He knows them all by name. They are numbered by Him, and not one will be lost.

With the full assurance of His love and infinite power to save, we sojourn in this world. We do not do so alone but with the power and presence of Christ manifested in the fellowship of the saints of God. Equipped with the full armor of God, we are prepared for a spiritual battle in this present evil world. Assured of our final victory, we persevere through every battle, knowing that it is through His strength and power that we will be brought safely to our allotted inheritance in heaven above.

#27 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 27:1-23

Numbers 27 consists of two parts. The first part records the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, whose father died in the wilderness but had no sons. The second part lays out the plan of succession from Moses to Joshua in the leadership of Israel.

The key point of the story of the daughters of Zelophehad regards the preservation of land inheritance among the families of Israel. The "normal" pattern was for the land to be passed down from the father to the oldest son. In this case, there were only daughters. It must be remembered that Israel's life was completely tied up in their land inheritance in Canaan. Each tribe was allotted its own area, and this was not to change hands from one tribe to another. Perhaps some of you read books or watch films set in the Victorian era, where there is great drama attached to getting married—not only for the romantic elements but also for the inheritance connected with each family. That will give you some idea of the issues at stake here.

However, two things should be noted here. The first is that we should be careful not to read this passage through the hermeneutical lens of modern culture. The focus of the passage is not only the rights of women versus men, nor is it a question of equal treatment of the genders per se. The Bible has much to say on these questions. It teaches that men and women are both made in the image of God. They have an equal share in Christ's redemption. They are all fellow heirs of the gift of life. But there is also an order and division of labor He has granted to each, which is rooted in created reality. Given the sinfulness of man, there is a long history of abuses (both individual and collective) that can be catalogued. Speaking to them from a Biblical perspective is a legitimate and necessary task.

But these injustices are not the focus of the passage. It is not addressing a question of systemic or individual injustice from one gender to another on the human level but a heretofore unaddressed "gap" in the provision of God's law regarding land inheritance. What is Israel to do if a man leaves no son? How are the inheritance rights to be transferred? The revealed will of God does not simply limit itself to situations where there are only daughters but also where there are no children whatsoever (27:9).

The focus, instead, is on the question of the perpetuation of land rights for their family. The land was a type of heaven. Thus, the perpetuation of the land from generation to generation was a sign of the certainty of the heavenly inheritance promised to all the saints. Male and female, God's people have become His children in Christ. They are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. We already have the down payment of this inheritance in the Spirit that God has given us. The heavenly inheritance is not passed down through bloodlines but is given to everyone who is born of the Spirit.

The second part of the passage addresses the succession of leadership from Moses to Joshua. It begins by recounting the "rebellion" of Moses against the Lord. Even the greatest of God's leaders have moments of great failure. King David sinned grievously with Bathsheba and Uriah. Peter denied both the Lord and the truth of the Gospel during his ministry as an apostle. Perfect faithfulness cannot be attained by even the best of God's servants. This is no excuse for our sins, but moments of failure and imperfection among God's leaders are a reminder that salvation can be found in God alone.

With Moses forbidden to enter the promised land, Israel faces the prospect of being "sheep that have no shepherd." Joshua is thus appointed to succeed Moses. Joshua is identified as a man "in whom in the Spirit" (27:18). God equips His servants for the tasks to which He has appointed them. Moses lays his hands on him and invests him with a share of his authority. In the book of Joshua, God will reiterate and assure both Joshua and the people that just as God was with Moses, so He will be with him.

This passage is a helpful reminder that God will never leave His church destitute. Sometimes the church is gifted with great leaders. Sometimes God is pleased to take them away. I am sure many of God's people could not imagine life without Moses as their leader. But after Moses came Joshua. While in many ways he never attained to the stature of Moses, God was pleased to bring conquest and victory during his time as leader. Moses continues to manifest his exemplary meekness and humility in this matter. He humbles himself, acquiescing in the will of God without complaint or bitterness.

In the fullness of time, one greater than both Moses and Joshua would arise. He would be called and commissioned by the Father but also equipped with the Holy Spirit to endow him for his Messianic work. He would fulfill the will of God perfectly, becoming the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. Through His death and resurrection, He would purchase not only redemption but an everlasting inheritance for His people. Although he was God's appointed leader, God's people rebelled against him--even putting him to death. But God exalted him and set him at his right hand.

With Him as our head, we need not fear the future. In His strength and the power of His presence, we can live our lives in faith without fear. As God said to Joshua, so He says to us in Christ: "I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous... do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Josh. 1:5-6, 9).

#28 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 28:1-31

Numbers 28 records the various offerings that Israel is to present before the Lord. This is material we have seen a few times already in previous revelation. The book of Leviticus began with a series of chapters outlining the provisions for the full scope of offerings, such as the burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt offering. We saw that these offerings set forth the entire order of God's work of salvation as it is worked out in our lives. Our approach to God begins with the blood of the burnt offering but then leads to a life of consecrated service (symbolized in the grain offering). In this life, we have communion and fellowship with God as represented in the peace offering. The fact that we may fall into sin during our lives as Christians is no obstacle to continued fellowship and restoration, which is pictured in the sin and guilt offerings.

The difference here in Numbers 28-29 is that these offerings are described according to the various times they are to be offered, whether daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly. The big point to be underscored is that at every time, we are to live self-consciously to the glory and praise of God. Each day begins and ends with an offering. Unlike the pagans, this is not an effort to pay off or placate the gods. It is a pleasing aroma to the Lord as it reflects the offering of the heart and life in consecrated fellowship with God. The fact that some of these offerings involve blood is a constant reminder that our approach to God is dependent at all times on the redeeming and saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Neither our persons nor our works can be acceptable to God apart from Him.

After the daily, weekly, and monthly offerings, we are brought again to the great feasts of Israel. It begins with the Passover because this typifies the foundation of our faith in the death and crucifixion of Jesus. The unleavened bread reminds them of the haste that should characterize their faith in fleeing for dependence upon this sacrifice. Death and judgment are imminent, but the day of redemption is at hand. Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed!

The feast of weeks pictures the glorious firstfruits of the harvest. The work of sowing and reaping is tiresome and difficult. The laborers of God will often grow weary working in His vineyard. But when harvest time appears, tears of toil become

tears of joy. This symbolizes Christ as the first fruits of the final resurrection harvest. Through Him, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, which is the down payment on our heavenly inheritance.

The temporal order of these offerings reminds us that everything is planned out by God. In our personal lives, we know that every day ordained for us was written in His book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16). Each day is surrounded by the reality of the restored fellowship and communion we have with God. Each week is punctuated by a Sabbath day of rest and refreshment in the worship and presence of God. As a church, we know that we are living in the midst of the unfolding plan of God, which has almost reached its completion. We live each moment truly on the precipice of eternity, with the heavenly realities beaming down upon us through the Spirit received by faith.

In the midst of a tragic story of sin and unbelief, this chapter serves as a reminder of the continued mercy of God to His people. Although they rebel against Him, He will not bring them to utter destruction. His anger may burn for a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime. Through His gracious provision, we have a means to be restored even when we fall. Through repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ, we walk on the path through the wilderness of this world until we attain the full possession of our heavenly inheritance.

#29 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 29:1-40

This chapter is really a continuation of the previous, completing the description of the various offerings to be presented to the Lord on the great feast days of Israel. It is organized according to the *time* of the offerings, moving from daily, monthly, weekly, to yearly. Chapter 28 contained only the feasts of Passover and Weeks, while the rest are covered here in 29.

Again the focus here is on the offerings that are to be made during each feast. That places the emphasis on the comprehensive nature of our consecration and devotion to God. All of our hearts and lives are affected by sin. But all of it is covered by the blood of Jesus. Every time of our life and every season of the year is thus (in this sense) redeemed by Jesus. There is no time where we are not under the redeeming blood of Christ. Likewise, there is no time where we are not consecrated to his service. This is the general point we have gathered from the section.

But chapter 29 specifically picks up where we left off. After Passover and Weeks comes the Feast of Trumpets. This feast was symbolic of the end of all things, when the Trumpet shall sound and the fulness of God's consummated blessing will arise. It is a reminder that life will not always continue as we see it now. The lawful joys and pleasures we experience are only temporary. While they are good gifts of God to be enjoyed with thanksgiving, they will one day come to a sudden end. Scripture warns us of the danger of become sleepy and complacent. One day a trumpet blast will sound. For those who are unprepared it will be startling and sudden. Likewise the difficulties of this life are only temporary. They may feel very heavy and unbearable, but God will soon come to lift the weight from our shoulders and brings us in the the festal celebration of his full victory through Christ.

The Day of Atonement is the great type and picture of the ultimate finality and efficacy of the work of Christ. Once a year the High Priest will make a single offering to cover all the sins of all the people of Israel. Both priest and people are covered in this atoning act. It is a reminder to them and to us that even these Mosaic provisions are temporary. One day they will pass away to make room for a greater priest and sacrifice to come. We must be covered in the blood of this lamb or only death awaits us. We need a substitute that God has provided in the death of his Son. By faith we

receive him and in grace he receives us. We obtain his spotless righteousness and the forgiveness of our sins. He takes our guilt and punishment, dying in our place.

Finally, there is the feast of booths. This feast was a reminder that Israel's life in this world will always be a sojourn. Their wanderings will not end when they reach the promised land. One a year during this feast they will reenact the wilderness journey and live in tents in all their dwelling places. Our hope is not for a better lot in our earthly life. To be sure, when God grants us earthly relief or better conditions for ourselves and our families we can receive that with thanksgiving. But the hope of our hearts is for the heavenly country where God dwells.

This feast is given special significance in this section of Numbers as it the longest subsection, outlining the offerings to be given in a cycle of eight days. That number is especially significant as it prefigures the transition to the NT era and the significance of the resurrection of Jesus. In him the era of sojourning reaches its end. During his life on earth he "tabernacled" among us, taking human flesh (John 1:14). In this he was tempted, suffered, and died. But in that same body he rose and entered into the heavenly promised land. We sojourn now in him with the power of his Spirit. The life of heaven has already begun for us in him. The powers of the age to come are upon us even as we are linked to him through faith and the power of his word.

Today we gather with the saints in festal assembly in the presence of this risen Savior. We offer no animal sacrifice, for Christ our Passover Lamb has come. Instead we offer ourselves as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God (Rom. 12:1-4). We offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that confess his name (Heb. 13:15). We offer ourselves not only for a few brief hours once a week. Like a drink offering before the Lord, we pour ourselves out in thankful service during the whole course of our lives (2 Tim. 4:6, Phil. 2:17). Whether this means continued life or certain death, we devote ourselves to God. He is the Lord and giver of life. He is the Creator who in the beginning made us from the dust, and from the dust he will call us forth to eternal life in resurrection from the dead.

#30 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 30:1-16

This chapter is all about vows. At first glance it may seem odd that this chapter is placed at this point in the book. But when we consider how God's covenant relationship with us is established through mutual commitments ratified by vows, it perhaps makes more sense. Israel's infidelity to God is made more heinous by the fact that they not only sin against God's law but against their oath to serve him.

Biblically speaking, we are to be people of our words. We stand by our agreements with our fellow men. Sometimes this will mean we have to absorb a loss (financial or otherwise). The righteous man keeps his word even if it is to his hurt. We will this way with our fellow man because God so deals with us. His word is true and unchanging. His promises are sure. He promised to love us and kept that word even to his hurt in Jesus. Christ promised to love us and save us. He kept his promise and died for us.

The passage also draws attention to vows in the context of our family relationships. Husbands and wives make vows to each other in marriage. This also specially reflects the oath-bound covenant relationship between Christ and the church. Parents also make vows with respect to the Christian nurture of their children. We do this when they are presented for baptism.

Married couples are bound to one another. There is a mutuality to this that needs to be honored. If a man is to make a new commitment with respect to his employment or some other area that significantly affects his family, the loving man will be assured that his wife is supportive and comfortable of the decision. In this he would be seeking to love his wife as Christ loved the church. He would be loving his body as himself.

Likewise, the wife would not make commitments without the agreement and consent of her husband. They should consult with one another in making such decisions to ensure everyone is on the same page. This will work itself a little different as the husband is the head of the wife according to God's design in creation and the pattern of redemption in Christ. The husband seeks consensus with his wife

as an expression of love, care, and understanding. The wife seeks consensus in her call to respect and submit to her husband in their mutual calling before God. But the goal is the same: to honor God as one flesh in all activities and decisions under him.

This is our vow and promise as married couples before the Lord. Sometimes keeping them is very difficult. Faithfully bearing our responsibilities irrespective of what others do is a sign that we are trusting in the Lord and finding our sufficiency in him. This is how Jesus loved us: returning evil for good and spite with grace. So we must love one another and so glorify him.

#31 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 31:1-54

This passage records God's judgment on the Midianites. Israel has had a long history with this people. They originated from Abraham through Keturah, whom Abraham married after the death of Sarah (Gen. 25:1). Moses also fled to Midian and stayed there for 40 years, marrying Zipporah and thus having Jethro (a priest of Midian) as his father-in-law. A Midianite named Hobab also accompanied the Israelites through the wilderness. As Moses said, he knew "where we should camp in the wilderness" and thus he could "serve as eyes for us" (Num. 10:31). While not technically part of the people of Israel, they were not-to-distant relatives through Abraham. Thus their relationship was governed by the promise of mutual blessing when Midian was supportive or cooperative. As Moses said: "...whatever good the Lord will do to us, the same he will do to you" (Num. 10:32).

Subsequent Biblical history shows that this principle was had another side to it. Do good to Israel and the Lord will do good to Midian. Do evil and he will execute his vengeance. The Midianites joined with Balak and the elders of Moab to oppose and curse Israel when they approached their lands in their wilderness wanderings (Num. 22). Balak proceeded to hire Balaam to curse them that he might defeat them in battle and destroy them (Num. 22:6).

This shows that the judgment executed on Midian in this chapter is not the result of arbitrary or uncontrolled divine anger. God's judgment is just. Although Midian was not worthy of any blessing from God, he had promised good to those who would assist his people. The very fact that this was held out to them was a matter of Divine benevolence. Their conspiracy to destroy Israel was a matter of heinous treachery, and that against their own relatives (recall their common descent from Abraham through Keturah).

The judgment is also fairly comprehensive. Just as all men and women will stand before the judgment seat of God, so God brings a judgment that affects the whole nation. This proves to be a stumbling block for some, but it still remains that case that war between nations affects all the citizens of a country to some degree. We are represented by our leaders. The decisions they make will affect us.

Likewise, just as Israel plundered the Egyptians in the Exodus, so Israel receives the spoils of war. Even here a divine order is imposed in which sovereignly determines how these things are distributed, and portions are set aside for the priesthood and for the Lord himself.

The passage is a reminder that God's people are engaged in a war in this present evil age. In the OT, this war took physical form in the conquest of Canaan. In the NT it is made clearer that our true battle is not with flesh and blood but with the spiritual forces of evil. We wage war against the world, the devil, and our own flesh. If we betray the Lord and align ourselves with these enemies, sure eternal judgment will come upon us. No evildoer will be spared.

But if we repent and are found in him, we have a righteousness that can cover our sins and withstand divine judgment. Because Jesus was not spared on the cross, we can be spared from the divine wrath to come. God is a God of justice. He will by no means clear the guilty. We will either be found in Christ or found in our sins. Today is a day of salvation, where we can be received by God in repentance and faith by his divine grace. One day Christ will come again to bring full salvation to those who trust in him, but also bring divine vengeance on the enemies of God. His people will be gathered to the heavenly Jerusalem, but his enemies will be cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Whatever troubles we might face today, nothing compares with the prospect of enduring the divine judgment. What relief and joy should fill our hearts to know that in Christ we have been spared from this great cataclysm and will be secure and protected in the fortress of his grace. With that confidence we can face all lesser trials with patience and even joy, knowing that he uses them only to increase and purify our faith that we might be found for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

#32 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 32:1-42

This chapter contains the story of the initial settlement of the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh in their inheritance in Canaan. These tribes were characterized by their possession of a great number of livestock, which required appropriate pasture-land to sustain. This land was located on the east side of the Jordan river, with Reuben in the south, Gad in the middle, and Manasseh to the north. A quick look at a Bible map of the twelve tribes will help you clearly visualize this.

The proposal obviously has great pragmatic appeal, but it initially meets strong resistance from Moses. The trouble is that this land has already been conquered through the Lord's judgment on Og and Sihon. If these tribes settle here, the rest of the nation will be shorthanded when they do battle against the remaining kingdoms in Palestine in the time of conquest. As this book has made clear, everything about Israel's encampments shows that they are preparing for war. Moses fears that if they settle early in these lands this will discourage the hearts of the people. History will repeat itself and God's anger will burn against them.

In response these tribes commit themselves to continuing with the armies of Israel during the entirety of the conquest. Although they will build cities and settle in their lands, only their wives and children will stay. The fighting men will go with the rest of the nation until the war is complete and every tribe is given its allotted inheritance.

This arrangement is a wonderful expression of a reality that characterizes the current life of the people of God. We live between what we refer to as the "already and the not yet." This means that while God's promises are already (in principle) fulfilled and certain, they are not yet fully consummated. We have already in Christ a definitive victory over sin and evil, but it is not yet fully consummated.

To put it in different categories, we can therefore say that we are simultaneously already at rest but still engaged in a spiritual war. We have true fellowship with the church triumphant in Christ, but are living as participants in the church militant on this earth.

Although we long for the fulness of God's rest, we continue to do battle in the power and word of God in the spread of the Gospel. We are now saved and possessors of a heavenly inheritance in Christ. But our elect brethren throughout the nations must still be conquered for Christ through the power of the Gospel. In our direct participation and support of the Gospel ministry we are engaging in that conflict for the sake of the rest of the church. In our personal lives we strive to glorify God and adorn the Gospel that it may assist in drawing others into him.

Emotionally, this means that whenever we feel the fatigue and stress of conflict and battle we can simultaneously draw on the strength of the certain future victory we will attain and have already attained in Christ. In him we have a heavenly inheritance that will never perish, spoil, or fade. He is keeping it for us in heaven. The battle we fight is long and hard, but God will use every part of it to cause us to grow in faith. We can be encouraged that we do not fight this battle alone, but that our brothers throughout the world share with us in the sufferings and glory of Christ. Not one of his soldiers will lay down his weapons until the Lord wills that we should cease. With this confidence and courage we can persevere through trial and have no fear of the enemies of Christ and the Gospel.

#33 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 33:1-56

Numbers 33 is all about places. Interestingly, a little earlier, we had a few chapters that reminded Israel of their sacred times: the appointed offerings by day, week, month, and year. Now we switch from sacred time to sacred places. They are journeying through the wilderness on the way to the holy land.

Just as Israel must journey through time as they await their inheritance, they must also journey through different places. They are not instantly transported to their appointed end but must travel over an entire lifetime (40 years). This chapter appears to be the result of a log that Moses himself kept, recording their journey stage by stage (33:2). It reads kind of like a genealogy, except it lists places instead of personal names.

But it is also annotated. In several places, Moses records some important details that recount key events along the journey. These details have theological significance. At Ramses, Moses notes that the journey began with a note of triumph in the judgment of God upon the Egyptians and (note especially) their gods (33:4). The primary focus of God's deliverance was religious, not political. His goal was to save them so that they might worship Him in the wilderness. After journeying to Succoth, Ethan, Pihahiroth, and Migdol, Moses notes that they passed through the midst of the Sea into the wilderness. Again, this is a note of triumph and victory.

But the tone of the journey soon switches. A few more details are given regarding their stay at Sarah, where the people grumbled against Moses for lack of clean water (Ex. 15:22-27). While the place was specifically named so as to always recall this event, reference to their rebellion in this record is indirect. No specific mention is made of their sin. It does contain a direct reminder of God's mercy in bringing them to Elim, with seventy palm trees and springs of water. The next detail also reminds Israel of their trials with water. Moses notes that at Rephidim, there was no water for the people to drink (33:14). Again, they quarreled with Moses over this and tested the Lord. God met rebellion with mercy when Moses used the staff he used in the Nile to strike the rock, which then produced water. The staff of judgment becomes a staff of grace. Water was turned to blood, signaling judgment and death. A rock now produces water to give life.

The record reflects God's covenant grace to us. He mutes specific references to Israel's sins but recalls the story in a way that puts the emphasis on God's forgiving

grace. God is patient with us in our weakness. He keeps no record of our sins. He will forgive our lawless deeds and remember our sins no more. As He did with Israel, so He does with us in Christ.

But judgment would come to the surrounding nations. We are reminded of King Arad, who heard the coming of the people of Israel (33:40). He fought against Israel and was destroyed. As the conclusion of the chapter indicates, God's covenant promise will be fulfilled. As they began their journey with a triumphant victory over Pharaoh and Egypt, so they will triumph in the conquest of the Canaanites. As judgment came on the gods of Egypt, so Israel is to execute judgment on the gods of Canaan (33:52).

The Exodus and the Conquest serve as types and shadows of our beginning and our ending. Our Christian faith begins with the death of Jesus, the Passover Lamb. He wins a victory over the kingdom of darkness and brings us salvation in our Exodus from spiritual slavery. But that is only the beginning of our spiritual lives. We must wander as sojourners in this present evil age. We will often grow weary and thirsty, tempted to grumble that God is not treating us fairly. In this, we are being taught that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. In this, we are being taught that Jesus is the water of eternal life. If we believe in Him, we shall eat and never be hungry, eat and never thirst.

Although this generation had many signs and testimonies of the grace of Jesus to come, which the faithful embraced and received, the true reality had not yet come. Aaron, their great high priest, died in the wilderness, having not been fully faithful to the Lord. Moses, too, would die before he reached the Promised Land. In Jesus, we have one greater than Moses. Moses was God's servant, but Jesus is God's Son over His house. In Christ, we have a fully faithful high priest who will never die but lives eternally at God's right hand. We live now in the time of war and conquest in which the Gospel goes forth to the nations. It is gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth. Nothing can stop its eventual success. There will be times of refreshment and times of difficulty, as the book of Acts and church history testify. Our task is to hold fast to the promise of God, knowing that He who began this work will bring it to completion.

#34 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 34:1-29

The last chapter ended with a preview of the conquest to come. Having wandered in the desert for 40 years, they are about to finally reach their place of rest. But it will not be attained without conflict. The Israelites are to drive out the inhabitants of the land, executing God's judgment upon them and their gods. The conquered land is to be divided according to each tribe: large areas for large tribes, and smaller areas for smaller tribes.

Numbers 34 defines the boundaries of this holy land. To help us understand how this chapter works, consider an analogy with our own country. If you look at a map of the USA, the borders of each state will, in many places, just be defined by straight lines. Intermingled with these are various "crooked" borders that follow the path of rivers, lakes, mountain ranges, canyons, or other natural barriers between land areas. A similar method was used to determine the borders of Israel.

The map starts with the southern border of Israel and works its way in a clockwise direction around the compass. This is significant because it describes the area that will be occupied by Judah. The royal tribe is given prominence as the one from whom the Messiah would come. Starting at the south end of the Dead Sea, they are to move southwest through the Wilderness of Zin along the border of the Edomites. This border will extend through Kadesh Barnea until it reaches the sea. Then the land was to extend to the "Great Sea" on the west (i.e., the Mediterranean). From there, a line was drawn from Mount Hot all the way to Hazar-enan for the Northern border. On the east, a border would extend through Hazar to the Sea of Chinnereth (i.e., the Sea of Galilee), down the Jordan River, to the Salt Sea (i.e., the Dead Sea).

At this point, we only have the broad borders for the whole land. But we know from the previous chapter that specific borders for each tribe will also be defined at a later date. Likewise, the fact that this has already been done for Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh is further confirmation of this. Additionally, this chapter also outlines the tribal chiefs from each tribe who will be involved in the division of the land (34:16-29). Note again that Judah comes first among the twelve. This is another reminder that none of this has any lasting significance apart from Christ: the lion of the tribe of Judah.

The point here is not political but spiritual. It goes without saying that "good fences make good neighbors." This is true for nations as well as families. But that is a

truism observed by the Jews (see Abraham and Lot's resolution to their conflicts) and the Gentiles. The point of this passage is to remind us that God has reserved for us a special place with clearly defined borders. That place is heaven. Every one of God's chosen people can be assured that it is clearly defined for us. Christ is in heaven now. He tells us that in his Father's house there are many rooms, and he has gone there to prepare a place for us.

Not one of Christ's saints will miss out on their inheritance. Speaking figuratively, we must remember that there is a plot of land in heaven already reserved for us. It has our name on it. The deed has already been certified and has been co-signed by Christ himself. Yet it will not be attained without battle and conflict. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force (Matthew 11:12). This is not a reference to physical violence but the spiritual battle in which we are engaged in this present evil age. This battle is not fought the way earthly wars are waged. The enemy is deceptive and often uses distraction as a strategy. He will make us think the battle is fought through political activism. At other times, he will deceive us into thinking that our brother is actually our enemy. Then we will end up fighting each other instead of him. The battle is fought against sin: the world, the flesh, and the devil. It does not find its center "out there" in everyone else but wages within the heart of each one of us. It is fought between the flesh and Spirit of God within us. As we fight in the Spirit's strength, we can have confidence, knowing that he is not only the power of God but also the down payment for our heavenly inheritance (Eph. 1:14). This means that even as we engage in conflict with sin to take full possession of the land above, we do so in the power of the victory Christ has already won and where he already abides.

#35 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 35:1-34

In the last chapter, we saw that God carefully defined the borders of the nation of Israel. They were to be a holy land in the midst of the impure nations. So today, the church is God's holy place, now scattered throughout the nations of the earth. Just as every tribe was assured of their allotted inheritance, every Christian can be assured of their place in heaven.

However, there is one tribe that was without borders: the Levites. During their wilderness journeys, the Levites remained in the center of the camp, keeping charge over the tabernacle and the holy things. Their inheritance was the Lord himself.

The question then arises: where exactly is the tribe of Levi to live? Chapter 35 addresses this question by commanding the tribes to each give some of their land to the Levites as cities to dwell in. They are also to give them an area of pastureland around the city for livestock. Specifically, the Levites were to occupy the six cities of refuge which God had set aside (more on this below): Kadesh, Shechem, and Hebron on the west side, and Golan, Remote Gilead, and Bezer in the east. This spacing was relatively even, meaning that a Levite was no more than a 1-2 day journey from any other part of Israel.

This spacing meant that the Levites were sprinkled throughout Israel. This is important because, in addition to their ritual function in ceremonies and offerings, the priests also had a teaching function in the Old Testament (2 Chron. 15:3; Mal. 2:6-8). While they were not ministering among the types and shadows of the tabernacle or temple, they would teach the people the word of God.

While the typical form of this arrangement has passed away, the substance remains for us in Christ. God has established local churches in particular areas and has appointed pastors to teach the word of God to them. The word of God is the lifeblood of the church. It is through it that God reveals himself to them. It is through the Scriptures that Christ, the great high priest, continues to minister to them. He applies his blood and Spirit to them as they receive it by faith.

The chapter also includes a more specific provision for cities of refuge, where the Levites were to live. The purpose of these cities was to give a person who had unintentionally killed another a place to live as a refuge from an avenger. It was also a place that an accused murderer could go prior to the time he stood on trial for his alleged crime (35:12). Detailed rules are given to determine whether he committed intentional murder or unintentional manslaughter. The man required to stay in that city must stay within its borders to be under its protection. Those required to stay there "permanently" could leave, but only after the high priest died (35:28).

By combining and mixing provisions for the priests and the cities of refuge, a clear theological point is being made. In one sense, the cities of refuge were cities that reminded Israel of sin and death. Murder is punishable by death. No earthly ransom can be paid for it. But by placing the priests here, these cities of death became cities of life. It is noteworthy that after the death of the high priest, the manslayer was then permitted to return to his home in his tribal lands.

These things are all pictures of Christ to come. Through his death, we are redeemed, and the unpayable ransom is satisfied. We are liberated from death and sin and are allowed an entrance to the heavenly land above. His perfect justice has been satisfied. God dwells with us now and will dwell with us fully when we reach our final destination. There we have the city of God, the only true and final refuge from sin and death.

#36 - Devotional Meditations on Numbers 36:1-34

This chapter expands upon an issue addressed earlier in Numbers 27. There, the Lord made special provisions for the daughters of Zelophehad. The situation they faced was as follows: their father died without having any sons. It was a family of all girls with no boys. The law stated that the inheritance would pass from the father to the oldest (firstborn) male of the family. In the absence of a son, what is supposed to happen?

Keep in mind that this is an issue that was worked out on the "front end" of Israel's life in the land. Since they were still in their wilderness wanderings, it remained only a hypothetical situation. But it was one they were sure to face in their own family!

The concern of the daughters of Zelophehad is not for themselves as an oppressed class, although it is certainly the case that in many cultures, women have been relegated to a less-than-fully-human status. In the context of the first century, NT Christianity's emphasis on women as fellow heirs of the grace of life and fellow image bearers with men was a revolutionary elevation of women that had great ramifications for human society.

But that is not the focus of the concerns of these daughters. Their concern is for their father's name (27:4) and the land inheritance of their entire family. That is why provision is made not only for situations where there are only daughters but also when the father has no son, no brother, and no uncles.

Here in Numbers 34, an additional concern is raised. People from the tribe of Joseph point out that if the inheritance passes to the daughters of a family and they marry a man from another tribe, the inheritance would pass from one tribe to another. This is because in marriage, the land of the daughter would become the property of the man. Over time, the clear borders between the tribes would begin to overlap, and a larger tribe would possibly take over a smaller tribe.

God addresses this situation by allowing a daughter to only marry within her tribe. In this case, the daughters of Zelophehad were to only marry men from the tribe of Manasseh (36:6, 12). Interestingly, this solution restricts the rights of these women to marry only within a more select group. The normal rule was that an Israelite could marry any other Israelite but not someone from a foreign nation. Here it is further restricted to only inner-tribal marriage.

This should make it clear that the point of the passage is not to address the question of women's rights as advocated by modern feminism (especially in its more radical forms). The Bible has a lot to say about how sin affects our relationships, especially between men and women in marriage. But that is not the point of the passage.

The focus is not on the relationship between the sexes, nor is it even about the rights of women as a class with respect to land inheritance. Instead, the focus is on the unbreakable promise of God to each tribe of Israel (including both men and women). God swore with an oath that each tribe would certainly receive its inheritance, and that this inheritance would be perpetual.

That is the reason this passage is included at the end of this book. It is not an ephemeral appendix that simply addresses a rare circumstance in Israel's life. It underscores the key point that has defined Israel's life from the Exodus to the time of the Conquest. Ultimately, this points us to the certainty of the inheritance we have been promised in Christ. With his coming, the inheritance is no longer tied to bloodlines and families. It is also not restricted to the people of Israel. The types and shadows of the land are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Faithful Israel looked beyond the earthly land to the heavenly land above. They desired a better country and a city that is above.

Both men and women in Christ are fellow heirs of the grace of life. They are partners in their hope for the inheritance above. While on earth, men and women are married and given in marriage, relating to one another according to God's design in creation. In the resurrection—when they achieve their full inheritance—they will be made like the angels of God.

During our earthly sojourn, we can be assured that God's promise to us is certain and sure. Nothing will keep us from our heavenly inheritance. It is kept in heaven for us. It can never perish, spoil, or fade. Moth and rust cannot destroy it. Thieves cannot break in and steal. It has already been obtained by Christ, the chief heir as the Son of God. In him, we can be certain that it will never be lost or transferred.

With that certainty, we can take up the battle call of God, waging war against sin and the devil. We can be strengthened in our sojourning and wanderings that while the wilderness may be wearying, there is a good land that awaits us in the world to come.

Blessed are those who have this hope! Even more blessed are those who have already entered into it. We already have its beginning in us through the down payment of God's Spirit. May this hope cheer and encourage us as we await the fullness of God's kingdom.