

Bible 101 - Numbers Chapters 1-6

Review: Numbers is the fourth book of the Torah, having been preceded by Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. Deuteronomy follows and concludes these five essential books of the OT, all written by Moses.

Genesis: In Genesis 1 and 2, we read of God creating the world in harmony and balance, but by Gen. 3, this perfection is destroyed by sin. Sin escalates until Gen. 6; there we read that "God observed the extent of the people's wickedness and he saw that all their thoughts were evil all the time" (Gen. 6:5). Then we read in the next verse that "God was sorry he'd created man." And so he resolves to start over. He calls Noah to ark-building, and except for Noah's family and enough animals to repopulate the earth, God wipes everything out in a flood. Man doesn't do well with this second chance; by Gen. 11, we realize that sin's presence is once again strong, and at the Tower of Babel, mankind demonstrates its complete disregard for God.

At Gen. 12:1-3, God calls Abraham and through a covenant made with him - a covenant dependent only on God - promises that Abraham will become the father of many people, and "all the world will be blessed through him" (Gen. 12:3). The latter statement is a clear promise of the Messiah, Jesus, one of Abraham's descendants (a point Matthew 1 confirms). At Gen. 22, God tests Abraham's faith, and as Abraham passes the test, God reiterates his covenant with him and his descendants. Abraham's son Isaac has two sons: Jacob and Esau. Jacob becomes the father of 12 sons, and their families, numbering 72, are in Egypt when Genesis closes.

Exodus: At the beginning of Exodus, God hears the cries of his people, now 400 years after Jacob and his sons (the family of 72) had gone to Egypt to survive a famine. They've become slaves, and through slavery God has kept them from assimilating into the Egyptian culture. He calls Moses to lead them out, and by 10 miraculous acts or plagues, defeats Pharaoh and all the Egyptian gods. The people enter the desert, and at Mt. Sinai, God restates the covenant he'd made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their offspring. God tells them in Ex. 19:6 that they are to become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," and to that end, he gives the law and the system of worship which revolves around the Tabernacle. At the end of Exodus, the people have been in the wilderness, at Mt. Sinai for a year, and have built and dedicated the Tabernacle.

Leviticus: In the next 30 days, God tells Moses what sacrifices and offerings are to be presented to him through the priests (Aaron's descendants) and that these five great offerings will atone for the people's sin and allow them, a sinful people, to approach and gain fellowship with their infinitely powerful, holy God. In particular, on Yom Kippur, once a year, the entire nation's sins will be covered through corporate offerings; on all other days, individual offerings to atone for sin will be presented at the Tabernacle. In these offerings we see Jesus who become the one-time offering for the sins of the whole world: Paul tells us that "God made him [Jesus] who knew no sin to become sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God (II Cor. 5:21). By the end of Leviticus, the people have been out of Egypt for 13 months; it's time to move on to the Promised Land. God will organize them for their

journey in Numbers.

Numbers: This book's Hebrew name means "book of wanderings," and that describes vividly what occurs during the 39 years the book covers. The English name comes from the two occasions when a census is taken: chapters 1-3 cover the first counting, and chapter 26 the second. One is at the beginning of their wandering, ca 1445 B.C. and the other just before they cross into the Promised Land in 1406 B.C.

Moses wrote Numbers, just as he wrote the other four books in the Torah. It is a book of narrative (things happen to specific people) and history (the two census takings are recorded in detail) and above all, of re-enforcement of the law and the covenant, God's agreement with them and their responsibilities to him.

Numbers 1: In the first four verses, we are given exposition: the setting, the date, who's orders are to be followed and by whom. We learn that Moses hears from God in the wilderness of Sinai, in the second year after Israel's departure from Egypt. It's early in the year; remember that the Israelite calendar begins with Passover, the month of Nissan, equivalent to March/April in our calendar. Dating their activities prior to their conquest and settling of the Promised Land is always in relation to their departure from Egypt in 1446 B.C. So the year is 1445 B.C., the Tabernacle has been completed and dedicated (Exodus 40) and the laws have been given in minute detail in both Exodus and Leviticus. God's covenant with Abraham has been renewed with Abraham's descendants (Ex. 19 and 20). God tells Moses, from the Tabernacle (which is symbolic of God's presence and the center of their lives) that he is to take a census of Israel by tribe, clan and family, specifically of men between 20 and 50. God knows that they're going to have to fight for their land, and he's getting ready: what is the number of fighting men available? And so they count.

Numbers 2: In addition to the numbering, the tribes are given assigned camping spots and marching orders - all in relation to the Tabernacle. Notice that there are 12 tribes of Israel, but the Levites, the sons of Levi, one of Jacob's sons, are not counted in the initial mustering of the militia. The Levites are the priestly tribe and their numbering and assigned duties comes in ch. 3. The arrangement of the tribes is orderly and logical; and from the air, it would resemble a cross. (See handout). The total number of men ages 20-50 in Israel is 603,550 (Numbers 2:32), and if an equal number of women is added, we're close to 1.3 million, and with those over 50 and under 20, the total number of people in the wilderness with Moses was at least 2 million. All were descendants of Abraham (with some exceptions; a "mixed multitude" left Egypt according to Ex. 12:38, Egyptians and other non-Israelites who'd married into families or who just wanted to get out of Egypt with them). Remember when Jacob's family went to Egypt 400 years before, the 12 sons and their families number 72 individuals; now God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would be like the sand of the sea or the stars of the heaven is literally true.

Numbers 3: In this chapter, the family of Aaron, himself a descendant of Levi, is numbered; they will be organized by assignments in ch. 4. Aaron, Moses' brother, is the first high priest and his sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar were commissioned and dedicated as priests when the Tabernacle was first built (Lev. 8). Nadab and Abihu, however, did not

survive to be counted in the census; they offered "inappropriate fire" at the Tabernacle's altar and were killed by God (Lev. 10). A total of 22,000 Levite males (a month old or older) are counted.

Numbers 3:40: God tells Moses to count all the first born males of Israel a month old or older. The dedication of firstborn males to God had been ordered in Exodus 13; God said all first born males, human or animal, belonged to him (this was in contrast to all the first born males killed in Egypt as the 10th plague, and on the occasion of the first Passover recorded in Ex. 12-14). The firstborn sons of the Levites would substitute for the firstborn sons of the rest of Israel. In the census, Moses found there were 22,273 first born males a month or older, 273 more than the total number of Levites. Therefore, God told Moses to collect money for the redemption of those 273 men; that amount of silver supports the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) work.

Numbers 4: The Levites are given specific tasks by clan: the Gershonites, Kohathites, and the Merarites all are responsible for sanctuary duty and for packing up and transporting the Tabernacle and its furnishings and setting it up for use when they reach their next camp site. God takes care to order the jobs of each clan: Kohath's descendants will be responsible for the most sacred objects in the Tabernacle (the ark, and various utensils in the Tabernacle). Gershon's family is to carry the curtains of the Tabernacle; the Merari clan has a different load to carry. Later we'll see that they are to begin an apprenticeship to the priesthood at age 25, become priests with duties at age 30, and to retire at age 50. The priesthood is hereditary; no one not a Levite may offer sacrifices or light the lamps or do any carrying of the Tent of Meeting's various walls or posts or coverings; it is an exclusive family with very specific assignments from God himself. Notice at the end of ch. 4, we read "And so the census was completed just as the Lord had commanded Moses." Each man in Israel has been counted and given a place for himself and his family around the Tabernacle in the camp site and in the procession when they break camp and move on toward the Promised Land.

Numbers 5: In Leviticus, God is very specific about who is defined as clean and therefore eligible for participation in worship and community activities, and who is unclean and thereby excluded from those activities. (The terms "clean and unclean" in the OT do not refer to personal hygiene but to ceremonial fitness.) For example, a woman's monthly period made her unclean, and before she could return to the community, she had to be purified through prescribed ritual (Lev. 15). Individuals who sat where she sat during her time of uncleanness were unclean; anyone who touched a dead body was unclean; a leper or a person with an infectious skin disease was so unclean, he/she had to live outside the camp (Lev. 13-14). Certain foods were unclean (animals with completely divided hooves which chewed the cud were OK; all others were not); childbirth, mildew in a house or on clothes, and other situations could also make a person unclean. In each case, a sacrifice or bath or both were required to be clean again. In Numbers 5, God re-iterates the principles of those laws.

Numbers 6: The Nazirite vow was a special dedication to the Lord which a person could voluntarily enter into for a period of time. The requirements were abstaining from cutting

the hair or eating anything associated with grapes: grapes, their seeds, raisins, wine. A person taking the Nazirite vow promised a time of separation unto God for a week or a month, or longer, and at the end of that time, cut his hair and offered a sacrifice to end the Vow. In our tradition, a retreat would be an equivalent; we go away for a week or a weekend and abide by certain rules - all to draw closer to God. And those in Holy Orders live by a rule for a lifetime commitment. Three men in the Bible were permanent Nazirites: Samuel, Samson and John the Baptist. In each case, the birth was a miracle (each was born to a woman formerly barren), and it was God's instructions to the parents of Samson and John that their sons be Nazirites. Paul takes the vow in Corinth and for 18 months, lives as a Nazirite.

Next week: We'll cover chapters 7-14.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Look at I Samuel 1-3 for the story of Samuel's birth and dedication to the Lord. Do you respect Hannah for keeping her vow to the Lord? What must it have cost her to do so?
2. Read Acts 18:1-11 and Acts 21:23-26 for the story of Paul's vow. Paul voluntarily took this vow; why did he do it?
3. God never asks us to make a promise to him. Why is this so?

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Numbers Chapters 7-14

Review: Last week, we spent some time remembering where the children of Israel had come from. They are descendants of Abraham to whom God made a promise in Genesis 12, a promise of land and blessings. This promise depended on God alone. All through Genesis, God continues to reconfirm this covenant with Abraham and his son, grandson, and their families. At the end of Genesis, Jacob's 12 sons are in Egypt - 72 people living in Goshen, with flocks and herds, a people who've come from Canaan to escape a famine. Exodus opens 400 years later; now the descendants of Abraham have swelled to number 2 million, and they're slaves. Their cries reach God and he calls Moses to lead them out of Egypt. At Mt. Sinai, their first long-term campsite, God gives the law and a system of worship - the 10 Commandments and the Tabernacle. In their first year out of Egypt, they've constructed the Tabernacle, and they have been given principles of getting along with each other and with God. Then in Leviticus, God instructs them in the use of the Tabernacle: the five great offerings, the dedication and consecration of the priests, and in both Exodus and Leviticus, God reaffirms his covenant with these people, his chosen people, who are to become a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6).

Numbers: At the end of Leviticus, the people are beginning to wonder about the Promised Land - the real estate part of the covenant. They have the law, they have a system of offerings, a way to be reconciled to God and remain in fellowship with him. But what about the land God promised Abraham and his descendants? All in good time. In the first couple of chapters of Numbers, God organizes the people so that they know who they are, where they belong, and what their jobs are. By tribes, they have been given assigned campsites around the Tabernacle, and the tribe of Levi has been given special duties in the Tabernacle and its packing, setting up and transport. In chapter 6, God gives them a special means to draw closer to him through the Nazirite vow.

Numbers 7: Each of the first six chapters is organizational; God's getting them ready to move and to conquer the Promised Land. In this chapter, the people, by tribe, give gifts, to the Tabernacle. First, carts are presented by the tribal leaders who helped taken the census (Num. 1). The carts and oxen will assist the Merrarites and the Gershonites when they transport the Tabernacle and its contents; the Kohathites get no carts because they carry the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. The rest of the gifts are exactly alike; from each tribe, silver platters and basins, grain, olive oil, a gold container for incense, and incense, and animals for sacrifice are given to God and God's work. The list of gifts is very specific - down to the weight of the silver and gold. Even though each tribe's gift is exactly like the others, God takes note of each one separately, much as Jesus did in Mark 12:41-44. Jesus saw that a poor widow gave 2 small coins - all she had to live on - and he tells the disciples "she has put more into the treasury than all the others."

Numbers 8: Now the Levites are consecrated. And this is in front of the whole nation; as with the priests, Aaron and his sons, dedicated and consecrated in Leviticus 8, the ceremony is public: the priests and Levites serve the people. They represent the people to God (a prophet represents God to the people). Many burnt offerings are part of this ceremony, and even

before the offerings, the Levites must be engaged in purification rites. God wants them to be very clearly separated to him for their work - and for everyone in Israel to understand that they are spiritual leaders.

Numbers 9: It's appropriate that once all the gifts are given and dedicated, the Levites prepared, that it's now the first month of the Liturgical year, Nisan, and time for Passover. They celebrated their first Passover in Egypt; now after a year, they're read for their second, and this time as free people. It must have been a joyous celebration (Passover is the longest continuously observed religious holiday in the world; modern Jews celebrated this year beginning April 5. It's always near Easter; remember that Jesus was crucified on Passover, becoming the ultimate Passover lamb, the once for all sacrifice for sin.)

At **Numbers 9:6**, some of the people, unclean because they'd come in contact with a dead body, went to Moses to find out what to do about Passover. God said they could celebrate a month later. But everyone ceremonially clean, Israelite or foreigners among them, were to celebrate on the 14th day of the month of Nisan, and then for 7 days, observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This remembrance is important to God's people, and he told Moses while they were still in Egypt that this was a permanent law: Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to be held every year at the same time and in the same way.

Numbers 9:15: We read of God's glory here - the Shekinah glory or the visible presence of God which appeared as a cloud by day and fire by night hovering over the Tabernacle. Since the camp is set up all around the Tabernacle, any member of the tribe of Dan, for example, could look up and orient himself to the cloud and then discover where his tent was - north side with Asher and Naphtali. All the others knew how to orient themselves, too. Once the cloud moved, they were to pack up and move with it, in the order of march established in chapters 1 and 2.

Numbers 10: God instructs Moses to make two silver trumpets to be used as signals: if one blew, all the leaders assembled; if both blew, all the people assembled. The signal to move would also be given by the trumpets, so much like the ushers direct rows to the Altar at communion, the trumpet blast would signal one tribe to get into position, then another blast would signal the next tribe, etc. We worship a God of order. Later, a feast of Trumpets was established by God, and it's now called Rosh Hoshanah.

Numbers 10:11: Shortly after the Passover ended, God said, "Let's go." The Israelites woke up one morning and the cloud had moved, and so one tribe at a time, they packed up and got into parade order. And as the tribes of Dan, Reuben, Judah and the rest were packing their families and tents, the Levites were packing the Tabernacle as God had directed. Off they went. Moses asks his brother-in-law Hobab, son of Reuel to go with them as a guide and scout. He knew Hobab was an expert in desert survival skills, and so he begs him to go. Hobab refuses, but apparently he goes with them because in Judges 4, we read of Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Moses' brother in law Hobab, was with them in the land.

At **Numbers 10:35**, we read a beautiful prayer which Moses recites when the Ark, the visible

symbol of God's glory, begins to move: "Rise up, O Lord! May your enemies be scattered; may your foes flee before you." and when the Ark was set down, he would say "Return O Lord to the countless thousands of Israel." Moses know that without God in their midst, they were helpless and hopeless.

Numbers 11: Just as the people had done when they left Egypt and moved into the desert, it takes no time at all for the complaints to begin. (In the KJV, it's called murmuring, and I like the onomatopoeic quality of that: Moses could hear that sound.) Here they say "life is hard." I guess they hadn't read Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*; the first line is that "life is hard." These people get comfortable and then, when God rouses them to begin the journey to the land he's promised them, they complain. Do we do the same? Change is always difficult, but these people are so vocal that God is angry with them and fire comes near the camp. The people ask Moses to pray that God will stop the fire, and God does. This is only one of several times that Moses intercedes for the people and they are saved because his prayer stays God's punishment. Then the "rabble" or those who are not native Israelites, begins to complain about the food. We have a description of manna in Numbers 11:7 - they've had this food for the year they've been in the wilderness, but they're tired of it. They ask for meat. Moses is angry now; he asks God why he has given him all these babies. God says, "summon the 70 leaders." God's about to do something. The leaders meet Moses at the Tabernacle, and God tells Moses that he will share his spirit with these men, and they will share Moses' burden.

Numbers 11:18: Now God says "get the people ready." Much as they had done in Ex. 19 when God gave the law, they are to purify themselves. God then miraculously sends them quail - so much meat that they have meat for a month until they are sick of it. God punishes them for their complaints with a plague and many died there. Then they travel on. This will be their life for the next 39 years; when God's glory moves, they move; when God's glory comes to rest, they do too.

Numbers 12: A notorious rebellion ensues: Aaron and Miriam, Moses' older brother and sister, complain about Moses' Cushite wife. Who she is we don't know, nor do we know what happened to Zipporah. But they grumble about this woman - and more significantly, they're jealous. They do not have as much power as Moses does. God hears them and Miriam is covered with leprosy; Aaron begs Moses to pray and he does. But God speaks very directly to all three of them that Moses is his chosen leader, the one he speaks to face to face, and that they must respect Moses. After all, if they don't respect Moses' leadership, how can they expect the rest of the people to respect him? This is serious. God heals Miriam, but neither Aaron nor Miriam is allowed to go into the Promised Land. It was important that the people (a) realize that God is their leader and that when they complain about Moses, they're actually directing complaints to God; and (b), they needed to know that God had chosen Moses for the job. Paul writes two letters of instruction on leadership to Timothy, his son in the faith. In I Tim 3, Paul says that a church leader (pastor or elder) must be able to manage his own family without difficulty because, as Paul asks rhetorically "if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? (I Tim 3:4-5). Moses knows the truth of this.

Numbers 13: God's plan, once the people moved from Mt. Sinai, was for them to proceed to Canaan, a journey of perhaps 10-14 days for that many people traveling on foot. But here's where things start to go wrong. They're camped at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran and God tells Moses to select 12 men, one from each tribe, to go into Canaan to reconnoiter - take a look, come back with a report. So off they go. Notice that Hoshea or Joshua and Caleb are listed among the 12 sent with instructions from Moses (vv. 17-20). When they returned, having gone about 500 miles in all, they brought grapes so large and heavy that it took two men to carry a cluster of them. In addition, they brought a report.

Numbers 13:26, they say that the land is "flowing with milk and honey," a very fruitful, beautiful place. BUT the people are giants and they live in fortified cities, they said. Two of the spies said "let's go," but the other 10 said "no way; we'll be defeated." Now who is their leader? Who will fight their battles for them if they trust him? God! Recall in Ex. 14:13-14 when the Egyptians are pursuing them, they stand on the banks of the Red Sea, and Moses tells the people: "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Lord will fight for you." And later, in Ex. 17, when they fought the Amalekites, God had given them strength to defeat them under Joshua's leadership - and this was early in their journey from Egypt. Now in Numbers 13, after a year in the desert, they are organized, they've camped and survived, but their faith is not very strong. The people agree with the 10 spies who say "we can't do it" rather than with the 2 who say "with God's help, we'll prevail."

Numbers 14: All night the people grieved; they'd heard bad news and it defeated them before they even fought a single battle. Discouragement and an attitude that "we can't do it" display a lack of trust in God. After all, who is fighting the battles? God has said "it's your land; I'm using you to clean out all the pagans so that you can bring a new way of life, faith in God, into the land." But the people didn't hear the "I am with you. . . I will help you" promise; they heard only "we are as grasshoppers in their eyes." In the middle of all their crying, Joshua stood up and said "let's go; it's a beautiful place; let's take God at his word and go conquer it." But the murmuring got louder; a contingent is ready to elect a new leader to go back to Egypt. Moses and Aaron fall on their faces; they know God is angry and ready to destroy them all. Once again, Moses intercedes: "don't do it. Remember the Egyptians." Moses wants God's victories to matter. If the people return to Egypt, or if God wipes them out, God's name will be a joke to the Egyptians and other pagan nations. Moses is jealous for God's honor. So God relents and forgives those who lost faith in him, but he says "not one of them counted in the census will go into Canaan." And because the spies were in Canaan for 40 days, they'll have to stay in the wilderness for 40 years - time enough for that whole generation which came out of Egypt to die.

Numbers 14:40: Now Israel feels bad, and they want a second chance. The next morning, they're up and ready to go fight for the land. But Moses says "you're disobeying God; he won't go with you this time. You've lost your chance." They go anyway, in their own strength, but they are beaten back by the Amalekites and Canaanites. It's a sad day in Israel.

Next week: We'll begin with ch. 15, turning back from the Promised Land to wandering.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. What does grumbling and complaining do to a Christian's life? Notice what Paul tells us: "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thes. 5:16-18). How are we to do this - rejoice and be thankful in all circumstances?
2. Bill Creasy calls Numbers "boot camp." Is that an appropriate description? What is God's purpose in organizing the people and training them in his ways?
3. Read Galatians 5:16 to the end of the chapter. Put in your own words what advice Paul is giving us as Christians.

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Numbers Chapters 15-20

Review: At our last session, we covered events in Numbers 7-9 which occurred immediately after the dedication of the Tabernacle in Exodus 40. However, by chapter 10, we've resumed the narrative of the wilderness experience, and in fact, midway through ch. 10, the cloud lifts from over the Tabernacle, trumpets sound, and the whole group packs up tents, family possessions, the Tabernacle and its furnishings, and taking flocks and herds, falls into the orderly procession which God assigned in ch. 2. They're on their way to the Promised Land - the "real estate" of the covenant, which God made with Abraham, first revealed in Gen. 12. In ch. 11, the old whining and complaining resumes. It began in Exodus 15:24 where the water they found was bitter and undrinkable, and has been a pattern of their lives in the 13 months since. This time the people express a desire for a varied diet, and in particular, meat instead of manna. God provides quail in quantities that sicken them, and many die. In ch. 12, Miriam and Aaron question Moses, and Miriam is punished with leprosy; here again, Moses intercedes in prayer and she is healed. But Moses' authority has been questioned by his own family, and it won't be long before others question his leadership. In ch. 13 and 14, a crisis is reached. Ready to cross into Canaan to begin the conquest, the people want spies sent first; 12 men go and 40 days later come back with a report. It is indeed a land of abundance, but there are giants, and "we were but grasshoppers in their eyes," say 10 of the 12, and the people choose to believe them, ignoring the advice of Caleb and Joshua that the size of the people and fortification of cities matters nothing when God is fighting for them. The people wail and cry all night and get up a plot to find a new leader so they can return to Egypt. Moses is angry, God is furious, saying "you've treated me with contempt, and no one counted in the census will go into the Promised Land." For that reason, they turn around, and for the next 39 years, will wander until the generation which came out of Egypt is dead. That's where we left them - wandering - last week.

Wilderness: It's worth mentioning here that the wilderness (or the desert, a term often used as a synonym in scripture) is a barren place; Moses calls it "the vast and dreadful desert" in Deut. 1:19. Often it symbolizes a place of testing: consider Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness where the Devil tempted him just before he began his ministry. It can also be a place chosen for its solitude, as in John the Baptist's life. For Paul, it was a place of learning (Gal. 1:17-18) for three years. In the OT, when writers refer to the wilderness it generally means failure: the failure of the people to trust and obey God. And in the NT, it is a mixed story: when writers look back to Moses' time, they see the wilderness as a failure; but for Paul, John the Baptist and Jesus, it was the opposite. Curiously, in early American writing, specifically that by Pilgrim writers, this country is often called a wilderness because it was filled with hardships for them. But the Pilgrims, invoking God's having sent them, are on their way to the Promised Land, their Zion on a Hill. The Biblical terms abound. We speak, too, of wilderness experiences today, references to a dry period spiritually. In Israel's history, the wilderness experience is not a positive one, though, in fact, God intended that it be one of learning, growth and maturing.

Numbers 15: The people have rebelled and refused God's gift of a land of their own; God has punished them with more hardship in the desert. Because their failure was a spiritual one -

they rejected God's gifts, they refused to believe him, and had neither faith nor trust in his ability to make their conquest possible - this chapter focuses on the means God has provided to restore fellowship with him. The offerings are once again reviewed, and God emphasizes the sacrifices for unintentional sins. He contrasts those unintended sins against "high handed" sin - the flouting of God's law. An example occurs: a man gathers wood on the Sabbath, disobeying, willfully one assumes, the law which says the Sabbath is a day of rest and not work is to be done on it. Moses asks God what to do and God says "he must die," and he is thus stoned to death outside the camp. Then God says "add tassels to your garments as a reminder of my law," and even today, the shawls which the faithful Jews wear have 613 strands in each tassel, one for each of God's laws. Jesus also wore these tassels, and it was that "hem" which the woman with the issue of blood touched for healing (Matthew 9:19-22). Jesus condemned the Pharisees who made their tassels extra long and ostentatious, however, as perverting the law and believing in appearances rather than obedience (Matt. 23:5).

Numbers 16: The rebellion recorded in this chapter is a serious one. Remember Miriam and Aaron questioned Moses' authority in ch. 12; now, after the failure of the spies, the punishment that sent the people backwards rather than forwards, and the stoning of the man who broke the Sabbath, there's murmuring again: has Moses gone too far? Is he taking the law into his own hands? Who does he think he is? Korah "sharks up," as Shakespeare would say, a rebellious band of 250 apparently Levite followers and challenges Moses. Moses goes to God, and God settles the matter, but not before the 250 followers and all of Korah's family are killed. What makes this even worse is that Korah is a Kohathite Levite! He'd been chosen and dedicated by God to God's service alone; he'd been given the highest order of trust - to carry the most holy things from the Tabernacle, But it wasn't enough for this ambitious man or his followers. Numbers 16:36-40: The 250 incense censers used as a test are gathered and made into a covering for the altar, a reminder of the incident. Once again we see Moses leading by prayer and consultation with God.

Numbers 16:41: There's more murmuring as the people question the deaths of Korah and his followers. Perhaps they too think Moses and Aaron are arrogant. God again says he's ready to kill them all; Moses intercedes and though a plague kills 14,700 of the people, many more are saved because Moses and Aaron act to make atonement for them.

Numbers 17: God now does something dramatic (not that the 10 plagues, the water from rocks, the manna and quail aren't dramatic enough!) to assert that Moses and Aaron are his chosen leaders, his instruments, his spiritual leaders among the people. Each of the 12 tribes' leaders is to bring his rod, walking staff, to the Tabernacle; each is labeled with his name on it, and Aaron's is among them as head of the tribe of Levi. (Recall that Moses' staff was used in Pharaoh's presence to become a snake, and later Moses' rod stretched over the Red Sea caused it to divide; with it, he struck the rock that produced water. His rod is definitely a symbol of God's power). The rods, symbols of authority, are left in the Tabernacle over night. The next morning, Aaron's staff has not only sprouted green leaves, it's got blossoms and almonds on it. This speaks of resurrection: a dead stick becomes a living tree, the source of fruit. Jesus was crucified on a dead tree; his death was atonement

for us, and his resurrection meant new life was available to us. Jesus told the disciples in John 15 "I am the vine, you are the branches," and as branches, we are to bring forth fruit as his life and strength (we're attached to the vine) makes it possible. God's miracle with the rod demonstrates that Aaron is his chosen servant; and his goal was to silence the complaints. Will it do so? No; the people still murmur. But if they murmur about leadership, they will die; God has made it clear that such complaints are sins against him.

Numbers 18: This chapter continues the theme of the priestly authority. Here God prescribes tithes and gifts to the priests. Certain sacrifices and offerings may be shared with the priests as food; the tithes will be their income. God also tells Moses that the Levites will have no inheritance in Canaan; in other words, while the other tribes get land, they will not. God is their inheritance. In Psalm 16, David says "Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance." And in Psalm 73, he writes "My flesh and heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Tithes mentioned here and elsewhere in the Torah were extensive. It didn't stop with 10% of income; it included first fruits, offerings for the poor and for special projects, and the first born of their livestock was to be given to God. Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver; the NT principle of giving is to give regularly, proportionately, and generously. (I Cor. 16:1-4 and II Cor. 9).

Numbers 19: Here is a curious ritual - the sacrifice of the red heifer. This red-colored cow, one not made pregnant and therefore having never given milk, was rare and valuable. It was burned completely, along with scarlet wool and hyssop - all symbols of purification. The ashes were then gathered and, when put in fresh (living) water, provided water for purification. The people were "on the road," and therefore, unable to sacrifice in the Tabernacle on every occasion when they were made unclean or when they sinned. This water was available to sprinkle on them to purify them until the Tabernacle could be set up and the sacrifices made.

Numbers 20: this is a significant chapter for many reasons. It begins and ends in death: Miriam's death is recorded in the first verse and Aaron's in the last. In between, Moses' dream of going into the Promised Land dies; he is punished for his sin of unbelief when, in response to the people's demands for water, he angrily strikes the rock; God had told him *to speak* to the rock. Moses is punished for this failure. As a leader, more is expected of him; he's held to a higher standard of conduct. Also in this chapter is an encounter with the Edomites, descendants of Esau. The king of Edom refuses to allow the people to pass through his land, and so they must detour. And before Aaron dies, his garments and role of High Priest are given to Eleazar his son in a touching ceremony with God as witness on Mount Hor.

Numbers 20 marks a significant point in the journey to the Promised Land; the time of wandering is over. We learn in Numbers 33:38 that "Aaron died there in the 40th year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt." The older generation is all but gone,

and the people are back at Kadesh, the spot from which they'd sent the spies and refused God's gift of the Promised Land.

Here are the stages in their journey:

First stage: Egypt to Mount Sinai (Exodus 12:31-18:27)

Second stage: the 13-month sojourn at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:1-Numbers 10:10)

Third stage: the first approach to the Promised Land, beginning at Mt. Sinai, but aborted at Kadesh (Numbers 10:11-Numbers 14:45)

Fourth stage: the 38 years of wandering in the wilderness until the generation of unbelief had died (Numbers 15-Numbers 20:13)

Fifth stage: The second and final approach to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:14-Joshua 2:24)

Next week: We're going to read an unusual story; stay tuned for Balaam and his donkey.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Read John 3 and pay particular attention to Jesus' talk with Nicodemus. Why is being born again so important to a Christian?
2. Why is God so adamant that Moses cannot go into the Promised Land? Do you understand his punishment (Numbers 20)? Should leaders be held to a higher standard? If so, why? What does this incident suggest for those who follow them? What is their responsibility?
3. Read Psalm 78 which recounts the history of Israel. What conclusions does the Psalmist draw about faith in God - and lack of it?

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Numbers Chapters 21-26

Review: Numbers 20, we found last week, is a significant chapter recording the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, and Moses' punishment - God denies him the final step into the Promised Land. For Moses, this had to be a bitter pill to swallow, but we read no recriminations on his part; he does ask the Lord (later in this book) to appoint a new leader and God does. Moses' concern until he dies is for the people and service to them and God to which he's been called. But his death is still in the future. For now, he's challenged to continue to lead them in the final weeks of their desert travel. In ch. 20 and 21, they'd defeated some of their opponents, and now they're entering Moab, just across the Jordan River from the land they'll march into. Before they do, they encounter opponents on the east side of the Jordan including a king named Balak who provides us with a series of incidents which, while entertaining, are also instructive.

Numbers 21: Rebellion isn't over, and we must ask whether this new generation, the one destined to enter and inhabit the Promised Land, is any more faithful than their fathers and mothers were. At the beginning of this chapter, we read of a victory over the Canaanites; God has enabled the people to conquer; they've trusted in him. But having to detour around Edom, they begin to complain again and this time, they "murmur against God and Moses," questioning Moses' leadership once more. Remember in chapter 17 God said he'd settle the issue of Moses' authority once and for all? His punishment is immediate: poisonous snakes called fiery serpents in the KJV come and kill a great many of the people. Now they turn to Moses and ask him to pray; he does and God tells him to make a bronze serpent and raise it on a pole. Those who look up at it, believing God can heal them, are saved. Again we see Jesus, and in fact, Jesus refers to this incident in John 3:14-15: "As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up on a pole, so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life." In both cases, looking up signifies belief and faith: if we believe in the atonement God offers, we are saved. Isaiah writes: "Look at Me and be saved, all you ends of the earth. For I am God, and there is no other (Isa. 45:22). And Paul said the cross was considered "foolishness" by the Greeks and it was a stumbling block to the Jews, but to those who believe, it is the power of God unto salvation (I Cor. 1). This bronze snake has a long history with Israel; during King Hezekiah's reign (approx. 700 years later), in a time of reform and revival, this good king of Judah destroys it. The bronze serpent had been given a name, Nehushtan, and they had worshiped it - an idol, forbidden by the 2nd of the 10 commandments. (II Kings 18:4)

Numbers 21:10: Following the incident of unfaithfulness and punishment, the people set off for Moab, an area on the east side of the Jordan. On the way, their spirits are lifted and they sing. Finally, they're beginning to see the end of their journey and their trust and faith in God increase. We read of several victories in the rest of this chapter. God is with them, and they are conscious of his power in their triumphs.

Numbers 22: Balak is the king of Moab, and he sees the mob of people coming toward him - a virtual sea of humanity - and of course, he's heard of their recent victories in the area. He's afraid, so he sends for a prophet he's heard of, someone to curse the Israelites and thus

guarantee that he'll win and they'll lose. He sends a deputation to Balaam up in Pethor near the Euphrates River - several hundred miles away. Balaam had quite a reputation! The king's ambassadors go with money and a letter inviting Balaam to come and curse the Israelites. Balaam says he must ask God for guidance. How he knows God is not explained; he's not an Israelite, but he's got knowledge of God and apparently prays to God. God tells him "don't go with Balak's men." God says that he's blessed these people so it won't do Balaam any good to try to curse them. Balaam sends the officials back to Balak, but Balak, a stubborn and fearful man, sends them back with more money. Balaam says more money isn't the answer; he can't go because God won't let him curse the people. But the next morning, God says "go with them but do only what I tell you to do." Here we begin to see God's hand at work in this drama. And so Balaam goes with the king's men, but on the way, Balaam's donkey becomes frightened when she sees The Angel of the Lord; she stops on three occasions and Balaam beats her. Finally the donkey talks to him and Balaam sees the angel. He's told once again to go with Balak's men but to be sure to do only what God tells him to do. They're on their way again. When they come to Moab, Balak is indignant about the delay, but the next morning he shows Balaam the people camped on the plain, apparently to help Balaam see the urgency of the task.

Numbers 23: Balaam asks the king to make sacrifices; he says he must ask God for guidance. God tells him again "Go back to Balak and tell him what I told you," and Balaam blesses Israel rather than cursing them. Balak is furious but he gives Balaam another chance. More altars, more sacrifices, and another warning from God that Balaam say only what he tells him to say. The second prophecy (words spoken for God) is again a blessing. Balak is unhappy, but once more, he agrees to another try.

Numbers 24: More altars, more sacrifices, and Balaam in his third declaration again blesses Israel. This time Balak is in a rage and is ready to send Balaam home. But once again, Balaam, the out of town consultant and con artist, gets Balak to listen to his prophecy. The fourth is just as bad for Balak: Israel will be victorious and other nations will also fall to Israel. It's apparently his parting shot; Balaam goes home and so does Balak. But we haven't really seen the last of Balaam.

Numbers 25: this chapter opens with the news that some of the men of Israel were sleeping with Moabite women, and not only that, they were worshipping their pagan gods. What's going on? Look at Numbers 31:8 and then at Numbers 8:16. It appears that Balaam returned to Balak with advice that must have gone something like this: "You can't curse these people; God won't allow it. But if you want to defeat them, you can do so by causing them to sin. Send some of your pretty girls over to the Israelite camp; get them to walk by the tents of the young men and see what happens. The Israelites have only one God; maybe they'll weaken at this temptation and forsake their God. That will make them vulnerable to defeat." Balak took his advice. And it worked: we see the evidence in Numbers 25. Not just a few men were following Moabite women; it was a very great number of Israelites who had fallen away and were worshipping Baal, the pagan god of the Moabites. God is angry and he tells Moses to find the leaders of this debacle; they are brought to the Tabernacle, but on the way, they see an Israelite man bringing a Midianite woman into camp!! Phineas, Aaron's son, was so

outraged, he seized a spear, followed the man into the tent, and killed both the man and the woman with one thrust of the spear. Nevertheless, a plague had already killed 24,000 people who had rebelled.

Numbers 25:10: God is happy with Phineas and because of his quick action and "zeal for God's name," God stopped the plague. The Midianites and the Moabites were then defeated by the Israelites.

Observations: What a story!! It's got suspense, intrigue, an out of town expert, a king who's offering all kinds of wealth to the prophet who can curse Israel - and what succeeds? Not curses but corruption. Balaam is pretty crafty and he's analyzed Israel's weaknesses well. He's able to subvert God's people in a stealthy way.

What does this say to us? Are we as vulnerable to such attacks? Of course. It suggests two things: first, we need to be certain where our faith is. Is it in God? Or is it in our own strength? And second, we need to stay in the Word of God. The Bible is our means of growing in knowledge of God and in understanding what he wants of us. The Israelites over and over again forgot God. They ignored his laws. II Timothy 3:16 tells us this is what scripture does for us: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do." God's voice is in every word of scripture - even in these strange incidents that happened so long ago. Each one can teach us obedience and faithfulness. Paul tells us that we are to put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6) and the Word of God is the sword of the Spirit.

Numbers 26: This chapter records the second census, this time counting the men 20 and older who are of the generation about to conquer and occupy the Promised Land. The numbering is just as it was earlier - done by tribe, clan and family. The total counted is 601,730, slightly less than counted the 603,500 at the first census.

Numbers 26:52: From here to the end of the chapter, God tells Moses how the land is to be divided. It will be distributed by tribe, clan and family, except for the Levites whose inheritance is God and not land (Num. 18).

Next week: further preparation for going into the Promised Land and dividing it up will be made.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. Try a different type of Bible study for your personal time with God this week. If you normally read through a chapter or two, try concentrating on just one or two verses. Memorize them, do a word study (see www.blueletterbible.org), and in this concentrated way meditate and reflect on what God is saying to you in this selected passage.

2. One other thing to try: write a reflection or response to the verses you read and meditate on each day. Make it a journal, and perhaps after a week, it will become part of your routine. In the journal, you can also list prayer requests and keep a record of answers.

3. Read and compare II Timothy 3:16 in several translations (you can do this at the website listed above). Paul says scripture teaches, convicts, prepares and equips us. In how many ways have you experienced scripture's effects on your life? What is your life verse? Consider asking the Lord to give you one to live by.

Let's close in prayer.

Bible 101 - Numbers Chapters 27-36

Review: Last week, we met Balaam, that religious racketeer who curses (or blesses in this case) for a fee. His involvement with Balak, king of Moab (and a coalition that included the Midianites) occurred in ch. 22-24, and 31. When told by God "say only what I tell you to say," he blessed Moab's enemies rather than cursing them as Balak asked him to. After four separate oracles which praised Israel and predicted its eventual defeat of Moab, Midian and all their neighbors, Balak sends Balaam packing. But we discover that his work is not done: behind the scenes, he convinces the Midianite and Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men, and then to undermine their spirituality and morality further by taking them to worship Baal. Moses is furious; God is angrier still. A plague kills 24,000 people, and all the men who participated were killed. We saw Phineas, grandson of Aaron, "zealous for God's name" killing a bold Israelite man who brought a Midianite woman into camp with him. It was quite a scene, and we learn that while the people can't be cursed into defeat, their spiritual strength can be compromised. In ch. 26, the second census is taken, and Moses is told that the land is to be divided among the tribes by their population: bigger tribes getting more land than smaller tribes.

Numbers 27: What if a man dies without sons? This happened and the daughters of Zelophehad came to Moses asking whether they might inherit their father's share. God said yes. And this becomes a part of the law (vv. 8-11).

Numbers 27:12: Moses will be succeeded by Joshua, and God makes this official when Moses lays his hands on Joshua and anoints him, commissioning him as the new leader of Israel. It is done before Eleazar the priest (who succeeded Aaron) and the entire assembly. Moses has a glimpse of the Promised Land, but he will not enter it because of his anger and unbelief in striking the rock (Numbers 20). Moses asks God only for an orderly succession, and God grants that request. God has demonstrated from creation to the present that he is a God of order.

Numbers 28-30: All through Numbers, the narrative of the people's journey, battles, failures and successes, has been interspersed with laws, and these three chapters are just that: a re-iteration, a further explanation of laws, but in this case, they have to do with daily, Sabbath, monthly and seasonal offerings, feasts and vows. All these instructions were originally given at Mt. Sinai. On www.blueletterbible.org, you can find a chart that shows all the laws and the various places where they occur in the Torah. Some, for example Passover, are given in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy; others appear only in Leviticus or Exodus. And Deuteronomy reviews almost all of the laws because Moses is teaching the new generation what God requires of them as citizens of the Promised Land.

Numbers 31: We got into this chapter last week because it was the end of Balaam. Here Israel battled the Midianites, getting vengeance on God's behalf for seducing God's people away from Him. Notice that Moses is emphatic that the women be killed along with the men. Customarily, women and children would be taken as slaves - more of the spoils of victory. But in this case, the women had lured the men away and therefore, had to be killed; they were

instruments of sin. The chapter concludes with a list of the plunder - livestock, silver and gold, other metal - all of which was to be purified before use, and then a portion given to God. The men who'd fought, their clothes and all the spoils they took were considered unclean until purified; then they could once again be a part of the community as men, and the other materials incorporated into their lives.

Numbers 32: Two tribes, the Gadites and Reubenites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, ask Moses for permission to take their inheritance on the east side of the Jordan. They were tribes with large herds and flocks and they found the land already conquered suitable for their use. Moses is outraged: "will you allow your brothers to go into battle while you stay home and tend your flocks?" They promise to fight once they've settled their women and children into fortified cities. God agrees to this compromise but they must keep their word to fight with the other 10 tribes until the conquest is complete.

Numbers 33: This chapter is essentially a log of the places where they traveled during the 40 years since leaving Exodus. And in the last section, vv. 50-56, God is explicit about what they are to do when they enter the land: they must completely drive out ALL the pagan people who now occupy it. They have polluted the land; God is punishing them for their sins. Sins of worship that include sexual orgies, offerings of children to be burned, and a complete shunning of the morality which God requires of us has made them God's enemies. And God says "if you do not do this, they will be come barbs in your eyes and thorns in your side." In Deuteronomy, Moses elaborates on those "barbs and thorns," and what the consequences of not destroying all the pagans and symbols of their worship will be for God's people.

Numbers 34: God describes the boundaries of their land.. God told Abraham in Genesis 12 that "to your offspring I will give this land [the land of Canaan]." And God repeats this promise in Gen. 13, 15, 17, 22, and to Jacob in Gen. 28. Now God gives specific boundaries - all land which he expected the Israelites to conquer, live and prosper in. But they never took all of it - recall that even in David (he was king from 1010-970 B.C.), was still fighting the Philistines, and he came closer to taking the entire land than anyone else. In fact, Solomon, who became king after David, reigned in 40 years of peace because of the victories which his father achieved with God's help. Leaders who will distribute the land are named in vv. 16-29. Notice Caleb is the first named; he and Joshua were the two spies who came back to Kadesh with a positive report, saying "we can do this with God's help." They are the only survivors of the group who came out of Egypt. God is a God of order.

Numbers 35: God tells Moses that the Levites must have 42 towns to live in and they are to be throughout the entire land so that spiritual leadership is present throughout the land. Each tribe will give some of its land for towns where the Levites can settle (remember that God told the Levites that He was their inheritance in Num. 18:20). In addition, six towns of refuge are to be given the Levites. God explains in the rest of the chapter (vv. 9-33) that these are places where someone who kills another accidentally can live safely, protected by the Levites, thereby avoiding blood feuds and revenge. Laws and consequences of intentional murder are also given. Notice v. 33: "Bloodshed pollutes the land," God says. Remember he told them in Leviticus 17:11 that the life of a creature is in the blood, and therefore they were not to eat

blood, and to be very careful when slaughtering animals for sacrifices and food that the blood is handled respectfully.

Numbers 36: The book ends with a further instruction about women inheriting land when no sons survive the father. Clarification is made: if a woman who has inherited land from her father marries, she must marry within her tribe so that the land remains within the tribe. If she marries outside her tribe, she forfeits her inheritance. The book ends on a hopeful note: they're preparing to divide up the land, and this assumes that they will conquer it as they have already conquered the land on the east side of the Jordan. Joshua will lead them on. But first, Moses will make his farewell speech to the nation.

Homework for those who want to go deeper:

1. In what ways is the New Testament concealed in this book of the Old Testament? Can you see Jesus in typology or symbols?
2. Moses will review all the laws in Deuteronomy beginning with the 10 commandments and going through the offerings and feasts. In the NT, Jesus says all these 613 laws can be summarized in two commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). Why are these the most important laws? What do they mean to Christians?

Let's close in prayer.