

Numbers (Part One): Journey In The Desert

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A major takeaway from all the many Psalms sermons I have given over the past 2-3 years is the connections between various parts of the Old Testament. Those connections are based on the five seasons, which are themselves based on the festivals that appear on those seasons—the appointed times. The five seasons line up with the five festival scrolls which are called the Megilloth, as well as the five books of the Torah (or the Pentateuch), and the five books of the Psalms which we went over (ad nauseam).

Obviously, we are observing the Feast of Tabernacles, which is the primary festival of the fall season, or the fourth season, of the year. Last year, at this time, we went through Book Four of the Psalms. My dad has been chipping away at the book of Ecclesiastes for about 30 sermons, and that is the festival scroll for this feast. So all that is left of the books of the Old Testament, that line up in this way, is the book of the Pentateuch for this season (which is Numbers). That will be my primary base of operations for my sermons here during the feast throughout this week.

Numbers is not an easy book to explain. Many commentators have basically just thrown up their hands in frustration when trying to look for any kind of structure or organization in the book because there does not seem to be any. If you have ever just read through or flipped through the book of Numbers, you just go from one thing to the next. Some of them say it is a hodge-podge of unrelated acts, events, lists, and instructions and those things defy a clear-cut path of order and reason, most having cut their teeth on the Documentary Hypothesis.

Many of you might know that as JEDP. That is the modern critical scholars approach to the Old Testament where they say that it has been written and edited and collected and put into form from various authors—one a Yahwist, one an Elohist, one a Deuteronomist, and one that is Priestly. But these people, who have cut their teeth on this Documentary Hypothesis, speculate that Numbers was basically cut and pasted from leftover materials from the time and things that the priests wanted to put in. Once they returned from the exile in Babylon, they needed something between Leviticus and Deuteronomy, so they cut and pasted Numbers altogether. But that is not how it worked.

Obviously, we believe that God supervised this book. He is the true Author behind it. So there may be something there—some structure—that we need to figure out. A

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commentator, R. B. Allen, in the Expositor's Bible Commentary Volume 2 that covers Numbers, writes this about Numbers:

The materials in Numbers seem to present themselves in an amazing, almost incoherent, variety. The book contains numerous lists of names and numbers, involved genealogies, dramatic historical narratives, arcane rites of purification and ritual sacrifice, lists of sites visited in the wanderings of Israel, lovely poetry, the quintessential blessing of the Lord on His people, impassioned personal encounters, rather dull and prosaic documents on priestly duties, engaging flashes of personality conflicts, stories of intrigue and betrayal, accounts of robust heroism and daring faith, tedious description of detail and ritual, some hymn fragments, quotations from other ancient books, exultant praises to God, and most surprisingly, exulted poetic prophecies providing a blessing of Israel from a pagan mantic" [that is a diviner] "who has fallen under the spell of the God of Israel.

See how much is in this book. And it just seems to be all have been thrown up on a wall and put in that way. So it does not look, from just a cursory glance at the book, that there is any underlying structure. But there is structure. God is not the author of confusion. It may look to our eyes as if it is just scattered things that are just thrown together, but it is not the case.

One way we can see some structure in it—maybe give just an overall idea of how it has been put together—is based on the three camps that the Israelites lived in and the two journeys between those camps. The book begins while they are camping at Sinai; then they journey to and camp at Kadesh; and then they journey to and camp on the plains of Moab.

So we see five parts there: Sinai, journey to Kadesh, Kadesh, journey to Moab, plains of Moab. There are stops along the way, after their journeys, and that is one way that this can be organized.

If we want to find which chapters go which section, chapters 1-10 are at Sinai: They go to Sinai, the Ten Commandments are given, they stay there while Moses goes up and down the mountain to God, they make the Tabernacle and various other things, the priests are ordained. One of the things, as we open up the book of Numbers, is they take a census. So that is the first time, or the first period, in the book of Numbers.

Chapters 11-13 are the journey to Kadesh (also called Kadesh Barnea).

And then we have chapters 14-20, which is their sojourn in Kadesh. They camp there

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for perhaps many years. But we only have a little bit about what they actually did there.

Then there is the journey to Moab which is just one chapter: Chapter 21.

Then chapters 22-36 take place on the plains of Moab. The plains of Moab, if you look at your map, are just on the eastern side of Jordan where they crossed. So they are there, poised and ready to go over Jordan into the land, and they spend several months there on the plains of Moab.

Here we have some organization and it helps us to figure things out.

By the way, I should mention this before we go any further, the Jews commonly title this book—not ‘Numbers’ but ‘In the Wilderness,’ an excellent title because that is what it is about. I do not know why ours follows the Greek.

Now take note that I mentioned that this book has 36 chapters, and I have three sermons. There is no possible way we are going to cover this entire book. So I am going to approach it thematically and look at those themes that are appropriate to the Feast of Tabernacles, and ourselves, at this time.

In this first sermon, we will pursue the book’s primary idea of journeying in the wilderness, following the title of the book, because this is where the performance of the festival choir comes in. The journey through the wilderness corresponds to our walk with God to the Kingdom of God.

If you will, let us turn to I Thessalonians 2 just to touch base on that particular theme or that particular idea. Paul is writing. It is one of his first epistles that he wrote, and he was writing it to a fairly new church in Thessalonica reminding them about his own conduct there when he was with them.

I Thessalonians 2:9-12 For you remember, brethren, our labor and toil; for laboring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved ourselves among you who believe [now he is talking about his conduct and his behavior toward them, as he lived with them, as he sojourned with them. And then he says in verse 11:]; as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father does his own children, that you would have a walk worthy of God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

So that is the goal that we have—that we are going to the Kingdom with God, we are going into His glory. We have been given that fabulous opportunity. But we must *walk* there. Just like the children of Israel walked to the Promised Land, we have to walk to the Kingdom of God. We have to live our lives in a way that is acceptable to God so that He allows us entrance into the ‘Promised Land’ as it were. We must behave ourselves, conduct ourselves (as Paul did among the Thessalonians) in a way that is worthy of the life that we have been called to. And so this is the underlying theme that we are talking about, and we are going to use the book of Numbers to illustrate that from the point of view of the children of Israel.

Before we go to that, maybe I should actually mention this right at this point. This explains the hodgepodge in Numbers. Because when you are walking through life—when you are going through life—just about anything can happen. Sometimes you need instruction and sometimes you need it in great detail. Sometimes there are examples that you need to have (person-to-person, conflicts—whatever you need to see, in the Scriptures) to help you come up with an answer. You need to see a whole crowd of people coming up against its leader. You need to see how people respond to a command that they do not like and fear.

You can see these various things coming up in the book of Numbers. It helps us to understand that we are going to come across great problems, we are going to have adventures, we are going to do this and that, we are going to need this and that other instruction, and so God provided us the book of Numbers which gives us a whole variety of things to learn from. So I think that is partially why this book has been plugged into the Feast of Tabernacles thematically because this is the festival where we commemorate that sort of thing.

In that vein, let us go to Leviticus 23 and see the instructions on the Feast of Tabernacles. Let us touch base here with the command.

Leviticus 23:33-36 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, saying, ‘The fifteenth day of this seventh month [here we are, fifteenth day of the seventh month] shall be the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days to the Lord. On the first day [here we are] there shall be a holy convocation [that is what we are doing]. You shall do no customary work on it. For seven days you shall offer an offering made by fire to the Lord.’ ”

Let us just stop there and jump down to verse 39.

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Leviticus 23:39-43 “ ‘Also on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the fruit of the land, you shall keep the feast of the Lord for seven days; on the first day there shall be a sabbath-rest, and on the eighth day a sabbath-rest. And you shall take for yourselves on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees, branches of palm trees, the boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days. You shall keep it as a feast to the Lord for seven days in the year. It shall be a statute forever in your generations. You shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.’ ”

It becomes clear, in reading through that, that the Feast of Tabernacles is linked to the journey of the children of Israel to the Promised Land and that, as we got to the end of that passage, God specifically wants us to dwell in booths as a remembrance of the Israelites dwelling in booths.

Our modern analog to dwelling in booths is what we are doing in this hotel. We have temporary dwellings, dwellings that are not our own—dwellings that are used by people on the move to go hither and thither throughout the earth. They have a goal in mind and they are trying to get there (or maybe this is the goal). But the idea here is that God wants us every year to almost playact in a way what the Israelites did by dwelling in booths for seven days.

The reason for doing this appears in verse 43: God wants all generations to know that He made them dwell in booths. That is the reason He gave for it. “You’re going to dwell in booths because I want you to remember that I made Israel dwell in booths when I redeemed them from Egypt.” That kind of seems a bit strange and it has struck me as a little strange. Why is God so concerned that we realize that Israel lived in tents or booths as they made their 40-year journey to the Promised Land?

Besides the fact that they were unsettled—they were on the move, which may be the first thing that comes to mind—a primary reason God wants us to live in temporary dwellings is to put us in mind of the conditions of their journey through the wilderness. Now I do not want us to go negative on this and think that we are supposed to focus on their privations as they went through the wilderness. I do not think the focus should be on the privations they suffered in a dry desolate landscape.

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The wilderness actually may not have been like the Sahara. We see these old movies where they are going through this absolutely lifeless desert climbing over sand dunes (and of course, in the movies, there are six or seven people behind Moses). But we understand that there were a lot more people (two-and-a-half million) and they would not have survived out there. God's miracles would have to have been just absolutely stupendous. They were in a wilderness area that they were going through, but going through the Sahara would have been just absolutely mindboggling.

But the Hebrew word that underlies the word 'wilderness' in Scripture does not mean necessarily a desert like we think of a desert, where there may be one cactus every half mile. That is not what they are talking about. In Hebrew, the word for 'wilderness' just means a place where there are no people. So it was an empty land.

The Sinai, at the time—wherever they were—may have had enough scrub and brush or whatever to have kept their flocks and herds going through these forty years. The people could not eat it, but the animals might have been able to. But there was certainly not enough water to support a great number of people, especially if they were in the neighborhood of two million or two-and-a-half million or whatever they happened to be.

The numbers certainly point to two-and-a-half or more million people because when they started out they were six hundred and five thousand men who could bear arms (from twenty to about sixty, I guess it was)—an equal number of women, and then the scads of children that each family had, and you start getting up into the two-and-a-half to three million people.

Like I said, I do not want you to think of the privations that they had because that brings a negative feeling into the theme we want here. The focus should be not on what they lacked, but on what they were provided. Turn it around—turn the negative into a positive, turn the frown into a smile—and we have not what they lacked, but what they were provided, what was given to them. That is why I believe that He ends its instruction in verse 43 with "I am the Lord your God"—"I want you to remember that the Israelites dwelt in tents. I am the Lord your God."

Normally, a caravan would go across the Sinai from Egypt to Canaan in days, maybe a few weeks—as fast as the camel could go. But they were there forty years! Sure, you could pack up on your camel—or whatever you were taking with you—enough to get you across the desert for a couple of weeks. But God provided for them every day for forty years, and then we multiply that by the huge number of people that they were, and so the focus shifts from the suffering and the privations of the people to the wonderful providence of God and what He was able to do for them.

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“I am the Lord your God. Don’t forget that. I made them dwell in tents for forty years and they made it across that wilderness when any other group of people led by any other kind of god would have died there. *Everyone* would have died there. There wouldn’t have been any descendants to go into the land.”

But what He wants us to do, in this Feast of Tabernacles, is to dwell on the fact that He is an awesome provider and He gives us wonderful things to enjoy. Is that not why we have about one-tenth of our income here at the Feast? Are we not supposed to be kind of living it up, eating what we want to eat (provided that it is not unclean), drinking what we want to drink (provided we do not go too far with that too), and having the joy of all the company that we have around us? God provides that. He provides everything that we have.

And so we have this week of the year in which we are able to act out this wonderful character trait of God. He has provided us what we need to really have a good time, but also to learn a great deal because that is a major part of His providence. The wisdom, the teaching that is given during these times, is all concentrated into this one week.

We are to learn, then, from the Feast of Tabernacles, that He is a God that provides for His people, no matter what conditions they live in (you could live in a tent, you could live in a mansion and anything in between). But, whatever the situation, we have to understand that God is the One who provides everything for us. We cannot say “My hand has gotten me this wealth” because if we do, we are in trouble.

Let us go back to the book of Numbers, finally. If the Israelites had really come to understand that He was their provider, then they would have known His character and how deeply He wanted to help them. They should never have doubted. But they really did not know Him and so they failed and they died. Let us look at this priestly blessing here at the end of Numbers 6. This gives you an idea of what God wants to do for His people. He was willing to do this for those sinners out there in the wilderness. How much more is He willing to do something like this for us who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ!

Numbers 6:22-23 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them . . .

He is giving this instruction to Aaron and his sons, and they are supposed to bless the people. In a way, what we could say is God telling the priests here, “When the people

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come to you, or when you have a great convocation, I want you to give them this message from Me.” What is the message?

Numbers 6:24-26 “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

That was God’s desire. And every time the priests said this blessing, it was to convey this desire of God to provide for them, and bless them, and be gracious to them, and smile upon them, and do good things to them.

Numbers 6:27 “So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.”

That was His desire, that every time they came before, let us say, the Tabernacle, and the priests came out, the first thing they heard was “Hey, people! I want to bless you and give you peace, and be gracious to you.” He was just trying to let them know what He was willing to do for them, and how kind He wanted to be to them, and how much love He wanted to show them.

(I am just extremely happy that we have developed this tradition in the Church of the Great God at the end of the feast that we leave this Feast to go back into the world with this same blessing ringing in our ears.)

So God was telling them “I am watching over you, I favor you, I love you, and I want to give you peace.” The word here is ‘shalom’ which we think of as peace, but it is so much more than that. Keil and Delitzsch, the commentators, say “Shalom is the sum of all good which God sets, prepares, and establishes for His people.” In other words, “I want to give you everything that will give you a good life and a good future.” So He says, “I will bless them.” That is, in short, what His meaning is that these priests are to convey every time they come upon the children of Israel. God is here to bless. That is His intention. And you know what, we usually screw it up.

We will go over to Deuteronomy 8 now. John Ritenbaugh already introduced it to you. So I can jump just right in. We will see some of the extraordinary lengths God went to to provide for Israel.

Deuteronomy 8:1-3 “Every commandment which I command you today you

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must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the Lord swore to your fathers. And you shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.”

That was the more important thing. Sure, He would give them their daily sustenance but what He really wanted them to do was soak up His Word—to imbibe the Word of God that He was giving them through the commandments and other things.

Deuteronomy 8:4 “Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.”

Wow! All that walking they did and not even their feet swelled up over those forty years.

Deuteronomy 8:11-19 “Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today, lest—when you have eaten and are full, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied [these are things that God would have given them]; when your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end—then you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.’ And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day. Then it shall be, if you by any means forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods, and serve them and worship them, I testify against you this day that you shall surely perish.”

So we get a statement from God about all the things that He did for them: It was one thing after another. Of course, every day He fed them miraculously with manna. Multiply that out every day times every year, it is just an incredible number of times that He showed His miracle of providence to them. Like He says, He drew water out of rocks; He sent quail by the millions; He kept their shoes and their clothes intact for forty years (He does not say He sent them to the dry cleaner; I am sure they were smelly and dusty, but they at least did not wear out). Even their feet did not swell, like He said. That is care just for their physical bodies. He handled their every need.

The bottom line is, as they were waiting here at the edge of the Jordan River, He was willing to carry out this type of care into the Promised Land and expand it exponentially with all this silver and gold and these houses and whatever other things that they would get in the land. He was going to provide all that for them, and all He wanted to do was warn them that when they finally got all this wealth that they were going to have in the land, that they not forget that He was the One who provided it.

He is the power behind whatever level of wealth that we have too. That is the lesson we have to draw from this. Even though we were not in the wilderness with them, we are in a different wilderness, and He is still providing for His people and He is still giving us all that we have and more. So whatever level of wealth that we have—whether we think it is very much, or whether we have sufficient for our needs, or whether we are very wealthy (whatever level that is)—you did not get it by your own hands.

Even though you might feel you did, God is saying “If you really look deeply, I’ve provided that level of wealth.” We cannot afford to forget the fact that He is the power behind our wealth. It does not even have to be monetary wealth, it could be a wealth of knowledge or a wealth of anything that you have that value—He is the One that has provided that.

The warning here, as we get to the end of this chapter, is that as soon as we forget that God is providing for us, that is when we die—that is when start to perish—because we have taken our eyes off of God and are starting to think that we are something special. Of course, the whole theme of this particular chapter is that He did this to humble us. And once we start getting proud and start thinking that we have done all this wonderful stuff, we are in trouble.

Let us go to the book of Numbers again and we will see the incident with the quail.

Numbers 11:4-6 Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to

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intense craving; so the children of Israel also wept again and said: “Who will give us meat to eat?” We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our whole being is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes [already they are showing contempt for God’s miracles and looking back to what they had in Egypt]!”

Numbers 11:18-23 “Then you shall say to the people [this is God instructing Moses], ‘Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the Lord, saying, “Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.” Therefore the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the Lord who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, “Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?” ’ ” And Moses said, “The people whom I am among are six hundred thousand men on foot; yet You have said, ‘I will give them meat, that they may eat for a whole month.’ Shall flocks and herds be slaughtered for them, to provide enough for them? Or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to provide enough for them?” [So he was thinking logistics here—“How am I going to feed all these people for a month?”] And the Lord said to Moses, “Has the Lord’s arm been shortened? Now you shall see whether My word will befall you or not.”

Numbers 11:31 Now a wind went out from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea and left them fluttering near the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits above the surface of the ground.

So we are talking deep. That is like three feet.

Numbers 11:32 And the people stayed up all that day, all that night, and all the next day, and gathered the quail (he who gathered least gathered ten homers [110 bushels]); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp.

There is not much meat on quail, but still, 110 bushels of quail, that is a lot of quail for each person or each family. Let us see how far they want to go here.

Numbers 11:33-34 But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague. So he called the name of that place Kibroth Hattavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.

You do not mess with God! Do not despise the things that He provided. This would be analogous to us a few years into our conversion, or many years into conversion (who knows when we would finally come to this point), but it would be the time when we begin rejecting God's Word and way and begin to desire the life we had—the life we lived before our calling—and we look back on those days as if they were our glory days ("I had so much fun back then, that was wonderful; I just love living that life") and we yearn for those days.

And so God decided that He would prove to them how He could provide for them by doing it in an exaggerated way. If they had just asked nicely, "Moses, could you ask God to please vary our diet a little bit? Could you have Him send quail?" But, instead, the whole congregation, if you read the account, were weeping in the door of their tents like they had been denied by some great thing by God, and Moses was about ready to tear his hair out. All he heard was weeping and crying, and people carrying on in the camp as if he had failed them and God had failed them.

But what God did, with this miracle, was to show them and to give us an example of how craving for those good old days, as it were, before our calling will lead us straight to death. And what He wanted to show them was that what He had provided—the manna, the water out of the rock (and we know the biblical symbolism of the manna and the water out of the rock)—is what leads to life, but their lusts would lead to death. So quite the picture here in this—and who knows how many people had to die to get this lesson across.

But, for us, we have to understand, in our journey toward the Kingdom of God, that we cannot yield to this intense craving for the world again—for the way things were before our redemption. We have seen plenty of people go that route. I am sure we could think of examples of people who just got fed up with this way of life one way or another—maybe it was the monotony, maybe it was the restrictions they saw that were being put on them. They wanted to smash down all the fences and borders and do whatever they wanted to do. We have seen a lot of that.

When the Worldwide Church of God broke up, how many people went that direction

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("Oh, we're free now. I can't wait to get to a lobster place")? It is funny. That is the same thing. That is the exact same thing that happened in the wilderness. And that was one of the first things people thought of. They wanted to get their pork bacon and their seafood.

But here we have this example in the book of Numbers that on the journey there are going to be times when those around us, and maybe we ourselves, succumb to this idea that it used to be a whole lot better somewhere else doing something else. And we need to fight it. We need to fight it and remember God's blessings. Even if God's blessings are monotonous and just seem to be kind of boring, we have to remember that the boring is what is going to lead us to eternal life.

Leroy Neff used to say "It is the plodders that will be in the Kingdom of God"—the ones that put one foot in front of the other.

We just have to remember too that the goal—the fullness of the blessings—are still ahead of us and we can endure a little bit of boredom to get to it.

But look at what God has provided. Let us go Romans 8. We are just going to pick up a few verses here where Paul (and Peter, as we will get to him) tell us just how much God has provided us already.

Romans 8:32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

II Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things [look at all those 'alls' there], have an abundance for every good work.

Paul certainly did not think that the things that God had supplied were paltry or even boring. God is willing to give all these things to us.

I Timothy 6:17 Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy [all good things, especially].

II Peter 1:3 as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue.

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So do not think that the spiritual blessings that you have been given—especially your calling and the gift of the Holy Spirit along with the redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ—are not big. They are huge! Nothing greater can be given to a person. On top of that, God gives us physical blessings to enjoy all things.

It has always got to be in the forefront of our minds that God is the power behind everything that we have and He is still providing abundantly for His people—His spiritual people—in their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. If you take nothing else away from this sermon, this is the most important point that we can take away in this parallel—that God provided everything and He provides it all for us.

We are going to go down to a few more parallels that maybe you can see examples in your life—or in the life of the church (things that happened, let us say, in Worldwide or whatever)—that parallel what happened in the wilderness. Maybe you did not think of these things in this way.

Let us go back to the book of Numbers, this time to chapter 12. This is when Miriam and Aaron (She is mentioned first; I think she was the ringleader here) criticized Moses.

Numbers 12:1-2 Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. And they said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” And [uh-oh] the Lord heard it [He was listening in. May that be an example to us all. Things we say in private, He hears.].

Numbers 12:4-10 Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!” So the three came out [post haste]. Then the Lord came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward [wonder how they managed that]. Then He said, “Hear now, My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision, and I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” So the anger of the Lord was aroused against them, and He departed. And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a

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leper.

Boy, you have got to be careful when you are talking about God's servants. This is quite an example. They were complaining about old news.

Now if we take what is traditional history on this, from Josephus, what he says is that Moses' marriage to this Ethiopian woman was a politically arranged marriage. This happened years and years before, when Moses was still a prince of Egypt. And he was going down into Ethiopia, at the head of an army, and they came upon this Ethiopian city (I would think it was the capital of Ethiopia at the time) and they had invaded the city and they were winning quite well.

Moses, according to the history, did not want to destroy the city and destroy the people. So it was negotiated. If I remember correctly, it was the Ethiopians that came to him suing for peace and said "We will marry this princess to the General (Moses) in order to cement this alliance and this city will become the property of Egypt." Moses said, "Fine. That works. This is the way we can keep from slaughtering more people, when we attack the city." So he married this Ethiopian woman.

We do not know exactly if she stayed in Ethiopia or whether she came to Egypt. But then Moses was branded a murderer, and he went off into the Sinai and stayed there for forty years while God trained him. And then he came back. He led Israel out of Egypt. And, evidently, among those people that went with them into the wilderness was his old Ethiopian wife.

Miriam and Aaron started complaining and gossiping about this politically arranged marriage from, what, fifty years ago.

Moses, however, had been honorable in this whole thing. Even though it had been a politically arranged marriage from many years before, he did his duty and supported her. He recognized her as his wife and she stayed with him. Now he also had his wife Zipporah—the Midianite woman that he had married and had his two sons with—but he supported this Ethiopian woman because they were married.

But they used this occasion to talk against Moses. What they did, because of their envy and self-righteousness or presumption in criticizing him, they began to perhaps slander him before other people. They gossiped about him, talked about him, and undermined his leadership. They wanted to bring him down to their level as it were and show the people, or show whoever they were talking to, that Moses is just a human. "Even though

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God has done all these great works through him, aren't we just as good as he is? Hasn't God worked through us too?"

It is no wonder God reacted as He did!

Now we can see this parallel. There have been many times where the brethren have criticized and disputed about leadership. Let us not even leave it at that. It is just the gossip and the criticism and the slander about a lot of things. And we need to understand that God hears it.

Now this was kind of a doubtful thing too. Moses, I think, was married to this woman. Even though it was a politically arranged marriage, he felt that the marriage was legitimate and that he should honor it. And they did not. So it was one of these things where there could be two sides. You could argue either side. It was debatable what was going on. It was a doubtful thing.

But we are not supposed to worry about doubtful things.

Let us go back to Romans 14 and see what Paul says about this. Because he faced it, not necessarily in this particular instance (this sort of thing in leadership) but he faced a lot of disputes over doubtful things, and he tells us how to handle these things. Now, notice, in verse 1, he does talk about "not to disputes over doubtful things."

Romans 14:7-13 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother [this is what I am getting to here]? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore [here is his conclusion:] let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

First of all, stop judging and criticizing each other. If you think something is wrong, he says, keep it to yourself because that person is going to stand or fall according to the judgment of his Judge, Jesus Christ—not you.

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Miriam should have kept her mouth closed. It was not her call even though she was Moses' sister, and Aaron was his brother, and they were the ones closest to him.

Let us go on to another one. I do not want to dwell too long on these. Back to Numbers 14. Now we remember this. They are coming up on to the southern edge of the land, at Kadesh Barnea, and they are sending out spies, one for each tribe, into the land. The spies go through the land for forty days and they come back and give a report. Ten of the spies give a bad report: "Oh no! These people are just so large and they've got well-fortified cities, big towers. They've got all the armaments that we don't have. We've come out of Egypt with just these flimsy Egyptian swords or whatever." They made it sound really bad. "And, of course, there is the Anakim that are so tall and big, we just can't overcome them." Caleb and Joshua say, "Hey, we can do this. We can go into the land and take them. The Lord is with us."

Numbers 14:1-10 Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night [here they are weeping again]. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! Why has the Lord brought us to this land to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should become victims? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" So they said to one another, "Let us select a leader and return to Egypt." Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the children of Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes; and they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: "The land we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into this land and give it to us, 'a land which flows with milk and honey.' Only do not rebel against the Lord, nor fear the people of the land, for they are our bread; their protection has departed from them, and the Lord is with us. Do not fear them." And all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Now the glory of the Lord appeared in the tabernacle of meeting before all the children of Israel.

We do not need to go any further because we know what happens. So here they listen to the negative reports and reject Joshua and Caleb's faithful, enthusiastic reports about taking the land. As Joshua and Caleb here say, in verse 9, the real problem here was fear ("nor fear the people of the land" and then he says "the Lord is with us. Do not fear them"). He mentions it twice.

They were afraid. They thought they were going to die. What they did was they thought the Canaanites were somehow stronger than God. This was the God who had led them, two years already at this point, and had helped them, of course, get out of Egypt; had conquered the military might of Egypt in the Red Sea; and then, when the Amalekites came and started attacking the rear portions of their march, He saved them from the Amalekites—as long as Moses' arms were held up. He had proved Himself to be able to protect them. But they feared the Canaanites more than God.

We find out, as we go through the rest of the chapter, that His punishment for them was that they would die in the wilderness—just as they had asked. It says that right there, end of verse 2: “Or only if we had died in this wilderness!” God said, “Okay. If you’re going to be so fearful and you won’t listen to My command to go in and take the land, I’ll give you what you want: You can die in your fear.” They would not get a chance to enter and enjoy that good land that He would have been so willing to give them.

Now we face these same problems a lot. It is not necessarily going into the Kingdom of God that we fear. We fear the steps along the way that we have to surmount in order to get into the Kingdom of God. We fear the consequences of doing good things—of doing what is right, of doing what God commands—and there is a fear of those Canaanites out there and their reactions to how we proceed in this journey toward the Kingdom of God. We fear letting our neighbors know that we dress up and go out to church on the Sabbath. Some do, some do not.

But some people fear to let their light shine, or they fear to do something that they know is right and so they hold back. Remember what it says there in the New Testament: “He who knows to do good and does it not, to him it is sin.” That may come from examples like this where you know that there is a good thing that God wants you to do, but you fear doing it and you fear the consequences.

Normally, what we do is we fear the people that it will affect, and it is mostly the people of our own families. Say we have been called one out of a family and we have to go out on our own and disappoint as it were the family that we are leaving behind so that we do not celebrate Christmas, we do not celebrate Easter, we do not do these things (we do not dress up on Halloween and do what they do). And so we think that they are going to think less of us or that they are going to try to stop us, or they will not talk to us, or whatever. And here we are doing what the Israelites did. God gave a clear command “This is what you have to do,” but they rebelled against that command and they stopped their progress. And they died.

The point I want to bring out in this is, a lot of times we face a difficulty where we fear

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the problem more than God. We fear moving forward toward righteousness because we fear the consequences, and so we are putting this fear before God rather than fearing God and His reaction and what He wants us to do.

Even if we do not know what is on the other side, or how we are going to react when we get there, we need to press forward and do what God says to do. And, normally, once when we get on the other side of it, we find out that our fears were groundless, God had us all the way, He had our backs. What happened when the Israelites went into the wilderness? They swept right through and could have gone even further than they did because God was with them.

So this is something we need to learn. We need to learn to trust God. If He says to do something, it is okay. We can do it, it can be done, and the benefits are going to be wonderful. We cannot be timid in this walk. If God says "Go," we go, we do it.

In II Timothy 1 Paul was talking to his friend, fellow minister Timothy. Timothy was supposedly a fairly timid person. He was not the outgoing 'let us go get them' type that Paul was (Paul would charge into anything without looking, it seems). And so he was helping Timothy here to get the right mindset.

II Timothy 1:6-12 Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore [he says] do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For this reason [these are the things that he suffered] I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

So we do not need to fear the problems that pop up in front of us. We do not need to fear going where God has commanded us to go. We have been given a spirit of power that should be able to drive us to do the right and good and to move forward in our journey to the Promised Land.

I am going to skip one here. I want to go to Numbers 20. I was going to go to Numbers 16 which is the rebellion of Korah in the wilderness. They accused Moses there of self exaltation. Of course, God, again, like He did in the example with Miriam and Aaron, showed who He was backing. I wanted to show there, just to give you a kind of a Cliff notes version of that point, that God had appointed Moses. That is what He still does in the church: He appoints, and anoints, and ordains. Even though we all have the same potential, He gives certain people certain jobs and we need to be aware that He is the One who does that.

But let us go to Numbers 20 and get the other side of that.

Numbers 20:1-12 Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there. Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron [here it goes]. And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Why have you brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here [now they include the poor beasts]? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink." So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals" [God heard that part too of their complaining]. So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock; and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them."

Here Moses lets his temper get the best of him and instead of speaking to the rock, he

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strikes the rock (and we know that from I Corinthians 10 that Rock was Christ). And he took credit for bringing the water out (he says 'we' there). So Moses makes a great error—a sin—and it was before all the people. He sinned openly there, did not hallow God, did not obey the instructions, and thus was denied entrance into the land.

The one God had anointed, the one God had ordained, sinned, and it was very clear it was a sin. This is what happens. Human beings, even ones that God chooses, make mistakes. Now this is different from the one that took place in Numbers 12 where they accuse Moses of something that was doubtful and probably where there was no sin involved. But, here, this is a time when Moses actually did sin. So you have to remember that ministers and others who are placed in authority do make errors and sins in their own lives.

Let us go to Romans 14. It is very similar to what we saw earlier in Romans 14:7-13, but it is more particular for this particular situation.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand [meaning, God can clean this up and correct the error. And, obviously, too, because the Judge is the One that cleanses us from sin, He can also forgive.]

The point here though is that Moses had to answer to God and he did. A minister or a deacon—or whoever is making the error among those who God ordains—too has to answer to God for his error. We are very quick in these days to jump on errors in the ministry because we have had such a terrible time with that in our history in the church. But we have to remember it is not our place to make that judgment. We have seen here already that God takes a very dim view of people judging others.

A minister is just one other in the congregation who has been given a different role. Now his errors may be larger and have greater consequences, but there are ways of working these things out. And God, as it says, will make him stand one way or the other.

I will finish though in I Chronicles 29. There are other things that we can pull from the book of Numbers as examples that we face in our journey, but there is no sense belaboring them. But I do want these final words from David as kind of an attitude that we should have. This is the kind of attitude that we should have as we go on our pilgrimage towards God's Kingdom.

I Chronicles 29:10-18 Therefore David blessed the Lord before all the congregation; and David said: “Blessed are You, Lord God of Israel, our Father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. Now therefore, our God, we thank You and praise Your glorious name. But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly as this? For all things come from You, and of Your own we have given You. For we are aliens and pilgrims before You, as were all our fathers; our days on earth are as a shadow, and without hope. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have prepared to build You a house for Your holy name is from Your hand, and is all Your own. I know also, my God, that You test the heart, and have pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of my heart I have willingly offered all these things; and now with joy I have seen Your people, who are present here to offer willingly to You. O Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep this forever in the intent of the thoughts of the heart of Your people, and fix their heart toward You.

Everything we have comes from God and our hearts must always be fixed on Him as He allows the rigors of the journey toward His Kingdom to test us. If we trust God to see us through, we will reach that Promised Land.