

Numbers (Part Two): Graves In The Wilderness

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If you would, please turn with me to Hebrews chapter 3. We will get Paul's take on the children of Israel walking through the wilderness. He writes:

Hebrews 3:7-19 Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ ” Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.

The author of Hebrews here (Paul, in my estimation) does a masterful job in summarizing the wilderness experience of the children of Israel—all those who came out of Egypt. He has nothing positive to say about them. Not one word. His description of them—the whole generation—is about rebellion, testing and provoking God, going astray, doing evil, being unbelieving, having hard hearts, being deceitful, sinful, disobedient.

In what is essentially an epitaph on an entire generation of Israelites, Paul concludes that they were denied entrance into the Promised Land because they never believed God and that led to their disobedience. They simply did not take His Word as anything of value. So they did not believe it, did not put any stock into it, and did their own thing.

What we see, the end of it all was, as it says here in the *New King James*, their “corpses fell in the wilderness.” This is a particularly effective and picturesque illustration, that their corpses fell in the wilderness.

The King James makes it a little bit more macabre. It says it is their “carcasses [that] fell in the wilderness.” The Phillips version reads that they “left their bones in the desert.”

The Amplified Bible reads, “whose dead bodies were scattered in the wilderness.” The Good News Bible (we are getting a little bit more into paraphrases here) reads, “who fell down dead in the desert.” And, finally, the Message says that they “ended up corpses in the wilderness.”

The result of all their sin and their rebellion and their provoking God is that they left their rotting carcasses from one end of the wilderness to the other. Every single one of them died. Paul says, “Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses?” All! Every. Single. One.

Now, depending on how many people Moses led across the desert (I use the 2.5 million people figure that we talked about the other day), dying every day for thirty-eight years in the wilderness but some died before, then, in those two years it took them to get to the border of the Land, the burial crews were working overtime. They had to have hundreds of people working just burying bodies. Think about it.

So, depending on the inputs that you put in into this mathematical equation, it is either a hundred people a day all the way up to about two hundred people a day that they put into the sand. That is a lot of people that you are burying every day.

Do you know what this means? This means that there was a constant atmosphere of death in the camp of Israel. People were dying like flies for forty years. The original generation died—not just one by one, sometimes they died in great groups of people. Paul says in one place there was 23,000 dead in one day (it ended up being 24,000 in all). But that is a lot of death, a lot of work having to get rid of death and keep uncleanness out of the camp as it were. It is the perfect illustration for a very well-known verse—we probably all have this verse in our memory banks—Romans 6:23: The wages of sin is death.

Normally, though, when we look at it in our own lives, we cannot see death as the wages of sin. We do not see all the links between the sin that we commit (maybe even a “small” sin, like a little white lie or whatever) that go down through the years that cause our death. We do not see our slander of our brother as being something that is mortal, that is going to take our lives. But they are there.

When we sin, whatever sin it may be, we do not hear the Judge’s gavel coming down and saying “You are guilty, and the sentence is death.” That does not happen. All we know is God’s Word saying that death is inevitable when we sin, or once we sin. We have His Word in Genesis 2:17: “In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.” Or maybe we could rephrase that last bit “In the day you eat of it—the day you sin—your death is sure.”

Please turn with me to James chapter 1. I am sure we have all read this many times. James has a way of putting things very concisely so we can see processes and such. And here is the process of sin—or, you could say, the process of temptation that leads to sin and then on from there.

James 1:12-16 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

Do not think, my beloved brethren, that it is going to work differently with you. The only thing that can make it work differently is your relationship with God and Jesus Christ, but you are still going to die.

So we see here, from James' point of view—putting it into the children-in-the-wilderness scenario—that He never tempted them. He was always straightforward with them. He always gave them the information that they needed, through Moses. But, whenever something happened that the Israelites ended up sinning grievously or rebelling, it was all Moses' fault, or it was all Aaron's fault; or it was God's fault—He brought them, by Moses, out into that terrible, howling wilderness. They did not have any fault in the matter. They were just poor victims.

But *they* were the ones that sinned. What, in reality, happened was that the Israelites always let their carnal natures and their lusts get the better of them, because they did not believe God. That was the bottom line. And, of course, then they fell into sin.

And, as the book of Numbers shows, in the fullness of time, as their sinful natures continued to harden, they died: One by one, by tens, by dozens, by scores, by hundreds, by thousands. Even under the watchful eye of God in the cloud and all of the things that He gave them, in nourishing them daily with manna and bringing water out of the rock and caring for them and protecting them the way He did with His almighty power, they became more rebellious, more hard-hearted, more unbelieving, and more dead, leaving their bones to desiccate in the desert.

So something along the lines of two-thirds of the book of Numbers is devoted to this singular proposition that if you sin, you die. Over the first twenty-five chapters of this thirty-six-chapter book, God chronicles the ever-increasing faithlessness and rebellion of the original generation redeemed from Egypt. And it is a sad and disturbing story. But, for us, it can be very

enlightening because this section—these first twenty-five chapters of Numbers—repeatedly emphasizes this ‘sin leads to death’ principle with one example after another.

Let us go back to the book of Numbers into the first chapter. I want to show you this division between the first two-thirds of the book and the latter third.

Numbers 1:1-3 Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies.”

Let us drop down to verse 45. Just notice this figure.

Numbers 1:45 So all who were numbered of the children of Israel, by their father’s houses, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war in Israel—all who were numbered were six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty.

So quite a large number of men that were able-bodied and able to go to war, from twenty upward.

Numbers 26:1-2 And it came to pass, after the plague [that tells you something], that the Lord spoke to Moses and Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying: “Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel from twenty years old and above, by their fathers’ houses, all who are able to go to war in Israel.”

Numbers 26:51 These are those who were numbered of the children of Israel: six hundred and one thousand seven hundred and thirty.

So we lost about two thousand in the total population here of men able to go to war, but it is still over six hundred thousand men fit to go to war.

Now let us read verses 63-65 which gives us the significant difference.

Numbers 26:63-65 These are those who were numbered by Moses and Eleazar the priest, who numbered the children of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho. But among these there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest when they numbered the children of Israel in the Wilderness of Sinai. For the Lord had said of them, “They shall surely die in the wilderness.” So there was not left a man of them, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

We see a clear distinction between the first census and the second census. The first census is of a generation that came out of Egypt, former slaves, those who sinned, those who rebelled, those who rejected God, and those who were cursed to die in the wilderness. But the second census is of another generation (call it maybe the second generation out of Egypt) who were different. There was something distinctly different about these two generations.

But the major difference that we are going to dwell on in this sermon is the fact that those in the first census died because of sin. All of their bones were strewn across the wilderness, just as God had promised. And by the time they camped in the plains of Moab and there was that plague as a result of the machinations of Balaam and Balak and the Moabites and the Midianites, all getting together to draw Israel into sin, just after that, all of them were dead.

All of that first generation were dead because of sin. Their idolatry and fornication with those Moabite women, in chapter 25, may arguably be the worst of their offenses against God. But one thing we do know is that it finished them off. By that time they were all dead. And this means that, after this, chapters 26 through 36 deal with the generation that entered the Promised Land. So there is a clear separation between these two sections.

Thousands dropped like flies between chapters 1 and 25, which was their just recompense for sin. But you know what? In chapters 26-36, there is not one recorded death. Of course, it is a short time, but even so, we did find out that there were hundreds dying every day, normally. But, here, in this section, from chapters 26 to 36, there is not one recorded death.

Death is dealt with, in one way or another, because, in this section, God tells Moses, “You know you’re going to die because you didn’t hallow Me there when you struck the rock, and Joshua will succeed you.” It is dealt with. It is a fact of life. But there is no one that actually dies in this section, which is a significant thing. This is a mark of the difference between the generations. This second generation was sinful, certainly, but not nearly to the extent of that first generation that came out of Egypt. They were somewhat different.

We are going to deal with that second generation in the next sermon on the Last Great Day, because they are in a position here on the plains of Moab, about to go into the Promised Land, and these last chapters here (these 11 chapters) deal with them preparing to enter the Land, and that is their job. They are to go in and conquer the Land and to settle the Land. And so we will deal with that in the next sermon. Our focus today is on these bad people, back in the first two-thirds of this book, who sinned and provoked God time after time after time after time.

So the first two-thirds has the theme of sin leads to death. The last third has the theme of preparing for life in the Promised Land. So we will get to that then.

Now, if you will, turn with me to I Corinthians 10 and this will provide us a bit of an outline for going through the rebellions of Israel. Paul writes here.

I Corinthians 10:1-12 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness [only two of them, remember; ‘most of them’ is pretty much of all

them]. Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; nor murmur, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

The first four verses of this passage set up the parallel between ancient Israel—those who went through the wilderness—and the New Testament church. Now, notice here, I have got five points here that gives us connections to them.

First of all, he calls them “our fathers.” Even though most of the Corinthians were Gentiles, he still wants the church—those who are spiritual Israelites—to consider those people in the wilderness as forefathers, our forbearers. They are, in a way, forerunners of us.

Second, he says that they were all “under the cloud,” which is a symbol of God’s guidance and protection, and they “passed through the sea,” which is a symbol of deliverance or redemption. We are under God’s guidance and protection and we have been redeemed. So we have something in common with them.

Third, their “baptized into Moses” parallels our baptism into Christ. So you have this Old Covenant/New Covenant type of thing where we are baptized into a relationship—a covenant—with God.

Fourth, both their food and their drink were spiritual. Now there is a difference between their spiritual food and drink and our spiritual food and drink. What he means here is that their food was supernaturally provided. So it was spiritual in the sense that God provided manna and God provided

water out of the rock—it came from the same source. But our spiritual food is Christ Himself. That is what it says in John 6, where He says He is food indeed and His blood is drink indeed.

So we both have spiritual food, except theirs was supernaturally provided physical food and ours is supernaturally provided spiritual food, if you will. But we will still have the same Provider. That is the important part. Christ is the provider.

Fifth, which may be the most important of all of these, is that we have the same leader: Christ. The Rock followed them. He was the One that was actually leading them. And, of course, we follow Christ as well.

So what he is saying here, in setting this up as this parallel between them and us, is that if the children of Israel are our forerunners, if they are types of us, if they are our physical forbearers, then we need to beware because, as he writes in verse 5, their bodies were scattered in the wilderness. They failed miserably.

Were they really any better than us? We have some advantages, but we still have to fight our carnality—our flesh—and there is always the possibility that we could fail. And so there must be a warning, a caution given that these temptations are out there—these temptations to sin and rebel against God—and we have to guard against them.

Now Paul's concern, which is illustrated in the next verses (verses 6-10), is that we will follow their sinful examples—this is the reason why he thinks this, or why he gives us this caution: We could think that our election by God—the fact that He called us out of this world and has given us grace—also gives us a free pass to behave as we have always behaved. This was a big problem in the first century church and it is a big problem now in Protestant America.

Actually what he is getting to here is a kind of 'once-saved-always-saved' mentality that because God has chosen us and given us such great blessings, we can neglect those other things that He requires of us. And so we could fall into the same pattern as the Israelites did—giving in to our lusts, being idolaters, giving in to sexual immorality, provoking God or tempting God,

and complaining, among other things. This is why he writes in verse 12: “Therefore let him who thinks he stands [that is, in God’s good graces] take heed lest he fall.”

We could, like many Protestants, soon believe that since we have eternal security, our conduct does not matter. And Paul is saying, “Oh yes, it does!” We are judged by our works, which is how we live, and we had better make sure that our works are much like the works of Jesus Christ, our Leader.

Now, following up on what Dr. Maas has said, thinking that we are eternally secure leads to devaluing the Ten Commandments (or, we could expand it out, as he did, to the whole Torah, the whole instruction of God) when we put a lesser value on the things that God has said that we should do, and then sins like those that Paul lists here begin to crop up because we do not think that those laws are as important as they really are. And, of course, we have seen that sin leads to death. But, for us, it is much worse because if we slip and fall and neglect this great salvation that we have been accorded, then our death would be the second death—and that is *very scary*.

Paul does not want us to lose our salvation and eternal life in God’s Kingdom just as the Israelites lost their chance to go into the Promised Land. So he writes in verse 11, and I am going to read this again, but from the Amplified Bible, to maybe help you get an even better sense of it. He says:

I Corinthians 10:11 (AMP) Now these things befell them by way of a figure [as an example and warning to us]; they were written to admonish and fit us for right action by good instruction, we in whose days the ages have reached their climax (their consummation and concluding period).

What he is saying here is that, as God’s children, we have to take this warning seriously and act righteously because we are ‘playing for all the marbles.’ As Deuteronomy 30 says, the stakes that we are playing under, as it were, are life and death. We have this one shot, this one chance to get in the game, as it were, and we had better make the very most of it. As Paul goes on to say, in Hebrews 6:1, we have got to “go on to perfection.”

There is an interesting commonality between these six things that Paul talks about here in I Corinthians 10. All but one of them (and that is the one in verse 7) are related to us in the book of Numbers. Every one of these examples comes out of Numbers, except the one in verse 7. The one in verse 7 comes from Exodus 32, which happened just before the book of Numbers opens.

You might also be wondering why I said six instead of five. Because there is actually a hidden incident in verse 5 (it is not actually hidden, but most people do not count it as one among those he mentions here; they just pass over it) but it is also from the book of Numbers.

What we are going to do is go through these incidents from the book of Numbers (not the one in verse 7, but the other five) and we are going to observe the progress of the Israelites' death march—because that was essentially what it was. Some of these we have seen before and we will, hopefully, go through those ones a little quicker.

So back to the book of Numbers in chapter 11. This is the incident mentioned in I Corinthians 10:6 which he called “lust after evil things.” We did see this one in the last sermon.

Numbers 11:4-6 Now the mixed multitude who were among them yielded to 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 [oh, they were in such a terrible shape!]; there is nothing at all except this manna before our eyes!”

Here they cry and weep and moan and complain that they do not have the food like they used to have. “This stuff that comes out of the sky every day and settles on the ground, it’s just so boring. And we eat it every day and we found fifty-six ways to cook it, and we still don’t like it.” So they are just complaining and making themselves more miserable.

And so, of course, we read that God said “Okay, that’s the way you’re going to be. I’m going to give it to you for not just one day, not just two days, not just a week. You’re going to have it for a whole month until you are sick of it.” And so that is what He did.

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. . .

Do you realize how big a day’s journey could be? It is not terribly difficult to walk 20 miles a day.

Numbers 11:31 . . . all around the camp.

This is outside the camp. How big was the camp that they were in? It must have been miles itself. And, then, this huge flock of quail fluttering on the ground for another 20 miles all about. I am just guessing, maybe they did not walk as far then, and it was a little bit smaller circumference. But it is a lot of quail, and it says here about three feet deep. Those are just millions or billions of quail.

Numbers 11:32-34 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); and they spread them out for themselves all around the camp. 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 Hattaavah, because there they buried the people who had yielded to craving.

So we see that this was an incident where many, many people died and many lost their lives, and many burial crews were recruited and they buried many,

many people. Paul calls their desire for meat, back in I Corinthians 10, “passionately desiring evil things” (that is from the *Young’s Literal Translation*).

It is not that the meat was evil. There was nothing evil about the quail. Quail is clean. You can eat quail. There was no problem there. The problem is it was an object of perverse lust on their part. They became gluttonous with these quail, and so it became an evil thing because of what they intended to do and how their attitudes were toward it.

Another thing it did: it became evil because it showed their ingratitude for God’s providence and that, of course, led to their provoking of Him. They challenged Him, as it were, to act in their behalf. They were forcing God to make a miracle of this providence, which He had already been doing, and they just did not think anything of it. He does not like to be pushed! And God reacted strongly and killed who knows how many (we are not given a figure here). But they all yielded to this intense craving and acted like beasts.

That is exactly the way it seems to be as you read the description of these people. First of all, all this weeping and moaning and acting like babies—little children—who are not getting their way; and then they blame Moses, of course, and Moses pulling his hair out (I think he was actually bald by about year three or four)—“What am I going to do? How am I going to feed all these people?”—giving him adrenal fatigue, I am sure. I know all about that. But, then, once they got the quail, they did act like beasts. You get the impression that they did not even cook the things—they just tore them apart and started eating them.

What this miracle of quails did is it revealed their total carnality. They sank to the deepest or the lowest level of almost animal-like behavior and they were totally responding to their fleshly impulses. And what it does is it shows us (and it showed them) in a very vivid manner just how lust leads to death. He made it quick, while it was still in their mouths, and He sent the plague. Like I said earlier, we do not often see the connection. But this helps us to see the very definite and strong connection between lust and death.

Let us go back to the other end of the Book, in I Peter 4, where we get some advice from the apostle on just this thing. He says:

I Peter 4:1-3 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in licentiousness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

He is saying, “That’s all in the past. If you’ve agreed to let Christ be your Master, those should be all behind you. And now we walk forward, doing the will of God.”

Just notice how quickly God responded to all that carnality among His people. He is not going to have it.

Let us go on to another one—Numbers 14—which we also saw in the first sermon. You remember they came up to the border of the Promised Land from the south, at Kadesh Barnea, and sent the spies into the land. And, of course, ten of them had a bad report and two of them had a good report. This is the incident that is the hidden one that appears in I Corinthians 10:5. And it is the one where they became discouraged, they provoked God, they rejected Him, and refused to enter Canaan after the spies’ reports.

We know what they did. They wanted to stone Joshua and Caleb with stones after their good report saying “Hey, we can do this” and were too afraid. Joshua and Caleb actually say these things (verse 9): “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.” Joshua and Caleb struck to the heart of the problem: They feared the people of the land; they feared their defenses; they feared their military might and their height (“They were the Anakim, they were big men, and we are like grasshoppers in their sight,” they said).

Let us go down to verse 20, after God had said “Let Me just wipe these people out right here” and Moses intercedes.

Numbers 14:20-23 Then the Lord said: “I have pardoned, according to your word; but truly, as I live, all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord—because all these men who have seen My glory and the signs which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have put Me to the test now these ten times [there must be some that we do not have in Scripture up to this point, but God said, “It’s up to here. I’ve just had it with these people these ten times.”], and have not heeded My voice, they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it.

Numbers 14:26-35 And the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, “How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who murmur against Me? I have heard the murmurings which the children of Israel murmur against Me. Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will do to you: The carcasses of you who have murmured against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above. Except for Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun, you shall by no means enter the land which I swore I would make you dwell in. But your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised. But as for you, your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness. And your sons shall be shepherds in the wilderness forty years, and bear the brunt of your infidelity, until your carcasses are consumed in the wilderness [that is at least the third time He said that]. According to the number of the days in which you spied out the land, forty days, for each day you shall bear your guilt one year, namely forty years, and you shall know My rejection. I the Lord have spoken this. I will surely do so to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be consumed [there we go, number four at least], and there they shall die.’ ”

So I want to focus on this fear factor that they showed here in coming up to the Land. Here was this thing that they were looking forward to most—

getting into the land of milk and honey, being free, having land to till on their own, to have cities, to have businesses, to do whatever they wanted to do.

And once they got on the brink of the Land and peered over the border, they said, “Oh, those people are awfully tall, they’ve got long spears, and they’ve got armor. Wow, did you see that tower? It must be forty feet high. And those walls are thick. We can’t do this. Let’s go back to Egypt where we were slaves because then at least we had stuff that our masters gave us and we ate every day. It wasn’t that bad, was it? It’s a lot better than these terrible people. They’re in the land of Canaan. Oh, they’re so big. They eat their Wheaties every morning.” That is kind of how they looked at it and said, “No, we can’t do this. It’s too much for us. They’re too many. We’re too few.”

They made excuses for not going in and taking the step in faith to cross into the Land, when God said He would be with them through the whole thing. But they were too afraid of the people. And it is simply a lack of faith in God. Whatever they lacked—whether it was in military training, in their armor, in numbers, whatever it happened to be—God would make it up. He said He would even fight their battles for them. All they had to do really was show up.

But they would not do it, and the problem is they did not see God. Even though He was right there in the cloud or right there in the pillar of fire, they did not see Him as any kind of help. They had not had faith that He was going to act on their behalf like He had these ten times or many times before. He opened up a sea for them! They had just come through it two years before. But these men, with their armor, were so much more fearsome.

We think it is stupid. How could they make such a choice like this? It is dumb. Here you have the great Almighty Creator of all things, the One who knows everything. All the enemy’s stratagems were known to Him. He could have melted all their armor off their bodies. He could have done what He did in Jericho and make their walls fall down. He could do anything. But they feared the men in Canaan and they made excuses for not wanting to go up against them.

Now I do not want to make too much of this because this is a constant problem for us. We have God in us, by the Spirit of God. His Spirit is there. Yet we are still hanging back. We are still timid. We still fear men and their reactions and their antagonisms to us. Our God is invisible. We do not see Him in a cloud. We do not see Him in a pillar of fire. We frequently do not see the works He does for us. We should be getting better at seeing them.

But, a lot of times, we put blinders on ourselves and we think we have to do everything by our own power. And then we are looking at ‘us’ against ‘them’ and we see that we are weak and nothing and we quail (sorry about the pun) before them when we should be boldly stepping forward in faith to conquer the land, to go where God wants us to go, to follow the path that He has set out for us.

But we do not. We hang back because we forget about God (‘out of sight, out of mind’ type of thing) and we think about ourselves: That is the real problem—that our presence is so big in our own minds that all we can see, all that we can think about, is ‘us, us, us’ and how things are going to affect us, and we do not think about the great and mighty hand of God that is right beside us.

Let us notice Proverbs 28 and verse 1 where Solomon writes:

Proverbs 28:1 The wicked flee when no one pursues. . .

They make up their enemies. They fear ghosts. They think that their enemies are so much stronger than they are and that they got their target right on their chests. But, no, God says through Solomon:

Proverbs 28:1 . . . but the righteous are bold as a lion [and they can be bold in the Lion of Judah].

Hebrews 13:5-6 Let your conduct [let your behavior, let your walk] be without covetousness [Paul writes here], and be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we may boldly say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?”

It is interesting here that the subject that Paul starts with, here in Hebrews 13, is conduct without covetousness, because that is essentially what is involved here in going into the Land, with these Israelites failing to go in to the Land—and failure on our part to step forward in faith when we are given a challenge by God.

The problem is that we are afraid of what we will lose—all the way up to losing our lives—and this is where covetousness comes in. We want to keep what we have, every last little bit of it, and so essentially what we are doing is we are saying, “Gimme, gimme, gimme, gimme. I want all these things that I have and I want to be content in all these things.” But our conduct should be without covetousness, and that is when we become content. Paul says it is just the opposite of human reasoning, just the opposite of our thinking.

Because what do we have when we lose ourselves to God? What do we have when we give ourselves fully to God? We have *Him*. He gives us all things. He is *everything* to us. We just read the other day that He is our life and when we give our lives to Him, we get His life in return. What can man do to me if we have the life of God in us?

So the lesson here for us is, ‘What can men do to us? So why fear?’ Because God has already covered and promised us far greater things than they could ever do for us, or we even have now that we might have to sacrifice. You are far better trusting in God and things that He has to give us than being fearful of anything that man might do to us.

Let us go to another one in Numbers chapter 16. This is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. We know what happens here. We have been over it many times. They say “We’re just as holy as you, Moses. Why do you take so much on yourself?” God says, “Hey, I’m going to show you just who I’m backing up here.” And so He does and Korah, Dathan, and Abiram and many of their families fall into this crevice that God opens up in the earth and they die. It says exactly here they go down to Sheol, the pit, after this rebellion.

The dust finally settles on this situation and then we get to verse 41.

Numbers 16:41-50 On the next day all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, saying, “You have killed the people of the Lord.” Now it happened, when the congregation had gathered against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tabernacle of meeting; and suddenly the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord appeared. Then Moses and Aaron came before the tabernacle of meeting. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.” And they fell on their faces. So Moses said to Aaron, “Take a censer and put fire in it from the altar, put incense on it, and take it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them; for wrath has gone out from the Lord. The plague has begun.” Then Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and already the plague had begun among the people. So he put in the incense and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; so the plague was stopped. Now those who died in the plague were fourteen thousand seven hundred, besides those who died in the Korah incident. So Aaron returned to Moses at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, for the plague had stopped.

Is death everywhere in these chapters? Death through rebellion! Paul speaks of this one in I Corinthians 10:10 as complaining or murmuring.

The impudence of the Israelites in this incident is stunning. They complain that Moses and Aaron killed Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and their families, as if God was not even involved. They totally neglected to mention that God had done this, that it was His power. “Oh yeah, Moses, he’s so powerful. He can make a huge earthquake and the ground opened up.” Poor Aaron, he just got pulled in because he was Moses’ brother, I guess. Did they do a thing with the staff and the miracle went through Aaron or something? I do not know.

But I find it really impudent that they fail to mention God at all. What they were, in reality, doing, is questioning God’s righteous judgment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, and then exacerbating the situation by ignoring Him altogether. They were trying to put it all on Moses and Aaron. It obviously

showed that it was not enough for God to kill Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families, there was still deep rebellion in the children of Israel beyond Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. And so they provoke Him again to anger.

It is very interesting here that it says that He sent a destroyer. It is like the plague of the firstborn (maybe, I do not know). But He sent a destroyer, an angel of death, with a plague killing them just like that. Fourteen thousand seven hundred died in just the space of a few minutes, the time it took for Moses to tell Aaron to get the censer, put some fire on it, and start running through the camp to somehow stop this by making atonement for them. God was hot in anger because this was a provocation He would not stand.

Let us go back to Philippians 2. Now, remember, we are talking about what Paul called the sin of murmuring, of complaining. Do you consider murmuring and complaining to be that bad a sin? God surely did. He killed fourteen thousand seven hundred people to make the example vivid enough for us to understand how distasteful murmuring and complaining is to Him in the church.

Philippians 2:14-15 Do all things without murmuring and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God . . .

God's children do not complain, or murmur and dispute.

Philippians 2:15 . . . without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world . . .

Maybe I should put in there and change it just a little bit, "among whom you *should* shine as lights in the world."

Philippians 2:16 . . . holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Our lives as children of God and lights in the world are supposed to be free of murmurings and disputes, free of complaining, free of arguments—among ourselves or with those people who are outside the church, in the world. As we saw in Numbers 16, murmuring indicates discontent, a judgmental spirit, and rebellion. And it is especially vile when it is directed at God or His servants who are doing something that God has given them to do. God responds to it with shocking speed and ferocity.

So let us take from this particular example that we can be *real lights* in the world, shining beacons, shining the light of Christ around us, if we cut the complaining and murmuring out of our lives. Do you know how that will set you apart from everybody else? Because everybody complains and Americans, especially, complain.

Back to Numbers. Chapter 21 this time. This is the one that Paul lists in I Corinthians 10:9 as tempting or provoking Christ. Let us go all the way back to verse 1 because we have got to see what led up to this.

Numbers 21:1-3 The king of Arad, the Canaanite, who dwelt in the South, heard that Israel was coming on the road to Atharim, then he fought against Israel and took some of them prisoners. So Israel made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If You will indeed deliver this people into my hand, then I will utterly destroy their cities.” And the Lord listened to the voice of Israel and delivered up the Canaanites, and they utterly destroyed them and their cities. So the name of that place was called Hormah.

I wanted to give you that first because they had just come off of a big victory and they were up, they were high, and they were “Oh, we can do this. We’ve already defeated one of the kings of Canaan.”

Numbers 21:4-9 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. [They go from high to very low. So discouraged.] And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness [oh, this refrain is getting pretty tiring]? For there is

no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread” [the angel food, the manna that God gave them, it is always the same thing]. So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

As we have seen, several of these incidents have also been provocations of Christ (provocations of the Lord, the God of the Old Testament) and they did it through complaining. It just really shows you how much God dislikes complaining because a lot of these things are about complaining, about murmuring, among other things.

This one is set apart, made a little bit different, by what is said in verse 4, and that is that they became “very discouraged.” We can even use the word ‘impatient’ because that is what their discouragement was based on. That they were impatient to get into the Promised Land and they had to make this swing around Moab and it was taking a lot of time, and it was going through some very bad part of the wilderness there, and they just thought “Oh, here we go again! We’re going *away* from the Promised Land. Moses is off his gourd. He’s leading us somewhere way off.” And they just became very discouraged.

The word in Hebrew that is translated here as ‘discouraged’ is called ‘qatsar.’ It is not all that important. But it is an interesting word because it literally means ‘to shorten’ (Your pair of pants is too long, so you shorten it). In this case, the word implies that it was their tempers that had been shortened—that they were short-tempered, they were anxious, they were discouraged, they were annoyed, they were vexed, they were grieved. They had a bad attitude. It is essentially what it comes down to. So, if nothing else,

they were letting their tempers, their bad attitudes get the better of them. It was a serious lack of patience and of faith and forbearance. And then they murmured; they complained about it.

Your attitude is very important and God is watching. It gets especially bad when your attitude bounces off somebody else's bad attitude, and you both get worse bad attitudes together. And then you multiply this by many thousands of people with bad attitudes, and it comes up as a stench before God and He acts.

Let us go back to the book of Ephesians, because bad attitudes can also be a problem with us.

Ephesians 4:26-27 “Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.

Ephesians 4:31 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

Paul is writing this to the New Testament church—to these people in Ephesus—and he is telling them to watch their attitudes. This is what happens when we let our tempers, or our bad attitudes, get the best of us. We are moved, as he says here, to anger, to bitterness, to quarreling, to evil speaking just as it did to the Israelites. We really need to learn to control our attitudes. Not just to put a façade over them but to really control them, to get down deep and root them out—even in tough circumstances (as I have here in my notes).

But maybe I should say ‘*especially* in tough circumstances’ when it is easiest to let our tempers flare or our attitudes go rotten because that is the time when we forget God. Because we are all focused on our own anger, our own bad attitudes, on what we are feeling and ‘Why wasn’t this done?’ and ‘Why am I always the victim?’ and ‘Why can’t I ever get ahead?’ and pretty soon, God is totally out of the picture in our own minds. We forget God.

We forget what He has done for us. We forget the position that we are in in His sight. We forget the goal that we are striving for. And if we wake up and realize that is when Satan, the serpent, has got a hold of us again. He has

prodded us into sin. He has prodded us into looking elsewhere—somewhere other than God—for the solutions to our problems. And you know what? Those solutions do not work and the attitude gets worse and it just ends up as a spiral of decline—a lot like what happened with the Israelites in the desert.

So what usually happens is we make a hasty decision (it is a wrong one), we are not thinking straight because we are seeing red, our vision is clouded, and of course, God is out of sight to our own way of thinking. Not very good.

Back to Numbers chapter 25 for the final one. Now if we had four or five hours, we could go through all the prophecies of Balaam that ended up at this point. But this is what happened after Balak found that Balaam would not tell him any bad stuff about Israel, they had to do something else, and so they ended up figuring out that Israel had a soft spot—a weak point.

Numbers 25:1-9 Then Israel remained in Acacia Grove, and the people began to commit harlotry with the women of Moab. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel was joined to Baal of Peor, and the anger of the Lord was aroused against Israel. Then the Lord said to Moses, “Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the Lord, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel.” So Moses said to the judges of Israel, “Every one of you kill his men who were joined to Baal of Peor.” And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Now when Phinehas the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand; and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel. And those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand.

This, of course, is the one that is mentioned in I Corinthians 10:8 as committing sexual immorality. Clearly, there was idolatry involved here too. It was probably combined in the sexualized worship of Baal. But with this

final plague, twenty-four thousand people died. All the original generation had died. They were all dead. And only Phinehas' zeal kept more of them from dying. I would not doubt that some of the next generation had been (or wanted to be) involved too.

What a stupid people they were! Where were they? They were on the plains of Moab. They were about to enter the Land. They could go up on any high point in the area and look into Canaan and see the good land that God had given them. And what did they do? They yielded, once again, to their carnality and forgot all about God, forgot all about His promises, forgot everything, and willingly joined with Baal of Peor. The shortsightedness of those people is just incredible! But we must take an example from them.

Let us go back to Colossians 3. Here again, Paul is speaking to a New Testament congregation and he is warning about the same problems, the same sins.

Colossians 3:5-6 Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience.

He has to warn us too, in whom is the Spirit of God, that we need to make sure we control ourselves sexually. And this is especially pertinent to us now because we live in a highly sexualized culture. It is probably about as bad as it was in Corinth, probably about as bad as what was it was in Colossae, and we need to understand that it is a real danger to us. It is not something that happened 3500 years ago in the desert.

This is still a problem, especially for us who try to be sexually pure before marriage and faithful within marriage. There is constant temptation everywhere you look—and pornography may be the worst of all because it comes right into our homes through the Internet. We need to be very vigilant about this in our own lives and keep ourselves pure, keep ourselves from the clutches of this sexualized culture.

Let us finish in Hebrews 4 and get the conclusion that Paul came up with when he made these statements about the ones dying in the wilderness and their bones being strewn about the desert. And so he has a conclusion for us.

Hebrews 4:1-3 Therefore [he says to you and me], since a promise remains of entering His rest [the rest of God, the Kingdom of God that is out there as a shining jewel for us to grab, for us to move toward and take, if you will], let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: “So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest,’ ” although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

Hebrews 4:11 Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience.

We could do it. We can enter that rest. We can go forward without falling into that same example because God is with us.