



Class 4 - Leviticus, Numbers

Old Testament Seminar - Immanuel Church

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Good morning and welcome back! Today we're covering the books of Leviticus and Numbers - the combined graveyard of annual Bible reading plans. Compared to the books we have covered so far, there is very little narrative and they seem to provide an excessive amount of detail about things we don't think we need to care about. If we are honest with ourselves, we could easily find ourselves thinking that the Bible would be perfectly fine without these two books. If that seems too brash for you to admit to, we often live without reading those books, so the practical result is the same.

What we want to see today, is what these books tell us about God, his holiness, and his work on the cross. These books *are* important, and they greatly enrich our understanding of what Christ did on the cross. I hope you will enjoy our walk through these two books this morning.

[PRAY]

Part 1: Leviticus

Let's begin with some context. Leviticus picks up right where Exodus left off. In fact, the entire book takes place less than a month after the tabernacle was finished¹. It is still around the mid 15th century BC. We're still at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God brought the Israelites after their escape from Egypt, and where Moses received the 10 commandments. It was on Mount Sinai where Moses also received the instructions for building the tabernacle. And after the Israelites built it, we saw that God's glory filled it, and it became the physical manifestation of His dwelling with His people. So what's next? That's where Leviticus comes in.

The book's name is derived from the Greek Septuagint, meaning, "things concerning Levites." But beyond just dealing with the Levites, its purpose is to further codify the relationship between

¹Between the first month of the year (Ex. 40.1, 34-35; Lev. 1.1) and the second month of the year (Num. 1.1) following the exodus from Egypt

God and Israel after the initial Covenant terms given at Sinai. In light of the New Covenant, Leviticus lays the foundation for Christian understandings of the need for holiness, the representative and exalted role of the high priest, and some other important theological concepts.

In the even broader context of Biblical theology, Leviticus is another step forward. It's a like a pit-stop on the way to the promise land. God is having His people remain at Mount Sinai just long enough for Moses and Aaron to receive these words on holiness. He wants to make it clear that being the people of a holy God is no light matter.

Theme

Our theme sentence this week is an easy one:

God is holy, and therefore His people must be holy too.

To be holy is to be distinct, to be different, and to be wholly pure. God is holy like this. He's unlike any thing or anyone. He is perfect. There is no flaw in Him at all. He has no shortcomings in ethics, wisdom, justice, or any other virtue. And because God is holy, His people, must also be holy. Why? Because as His people, they say something about Him to rest of the World.

Let's start with a question before we get into Leviticus. Why is it important for God's people to be holy?

The outline printed in your handout allows you to quickly see how Leviticus emphasizes these themes and it's this outline that we'll be using in our review this morning.

Notice that the flow of the book follows a real gospel train of thought: First there are laws to tell the Israelites how they might approach God (part I). But when they fail in their obedience, provision is made for them in the form of a substitutionary sacrifice (part II). Then, from that position of forgiveness and grace, the people are called to live holy lives (part III)².

For the first half of the class, I'm simply going to walk you through this outline to show how Leviticus puts all these pieces together. We'll start with the offerings. Then the priesthood. Then

²As a practical help, I encourage you to note the following key passages for further study: - Lev. 17.11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life." - Lev. 20.7-8: "Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you." - Lev. 16: Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement - is the most significant day in the Hebrew calendar because this is when the high priest entered into the holy of holies within the tabernacle to, "make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord." (Lev. 16.30)

the holiness code - which is both 11-15 *and* 18-27. And we'll finish with the section in between, 16-17, the Day of Atonement.

Chapters 1-7: The Offerings

Chapters 1 through 7 explain how ordinary Israelites are to bring offerings to God. There are five main offerings: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering.

We'll start with the **burnt offering**; it's meant as atonement for sin. Look at **chapter 1, verses 3-5**.

3 "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. 4 He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. 5 Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

The placing of the hands on the head is a symbolic act of the transfer of the sinner's guilt onto the bull. Then the bull is killed for that person's sins. So when an Israelite is aware of his sin, this is what he needed to do. How many bulls, sheep, goats, birds, etc. do you think a single Israelite might offer in his entire adult life? You think the Lord takes sin seriously? Well, the Israelites had that graphically imprinted on them through these offerings.

Then we have the **grain offerings** (2:1), offered as acts of devotion and remembrance. And there were **peace offerings** (3:1), which emphasized the fact that all that belonged to the Israelites was really the Lord's (3:16-17). Another offering was the **sin offering** (4:3), which was meant to cover sins that were unintentional, or done in ignorance (4:2). Even if one doesn't know some action is a sin, it still is. God's standards are measured by His own holiness, not by our own awareness. Did you ever think that if you didn't mean to sin, it wasn't sin? Intentions aren't everything.

Finally, there is the **guilt or trespass offering** (5:6), which is meant to highlight the wickedness of sin and atone for it at the same time. This particular one is to be offered when one becomes ritually unclean or sins against his neighbor.

Then, chapters six and seven layout how these sacrifices are to be made. Every detail is laid out:

how much of what offering is to be sacrificed, how animals are to be slaughtered, what utensils are and are not to be used, etc. *God intends his people, both then and now, to feel the sheer burden caused by our sin.* What's most noteworthy here is the uncompromising exactness of our Holy God - all as a foreshadowing of how Christ was the perfect lamb who was slain on our behalf.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Chapters 8-10: Establishment of the Priesthood

Having established how *individuals* are to offer sacrifices, Leviticus now turns to how the nation as a whole is to worship the Lord. Looking at chapters 8-10, we see Aaron's appointment as Israel's first high priest with all of his decedents "set apart" as priests (cf. Exodus 28.1). Within these chapters are more regulations and guidance on how priests are to conduct themselves in the execution of their duties. Again, the main lesson for us is that the sins of God's people require great effort to be "covered" by a seemingly unending flow of sacrificial blood. And once again, Christians are reminded of how Christ perfectly fulfilled his role as our "great high priest." After *his* sacrifice was complete, the great curtain in the holy of holies that separated God from man was torn in two. Now, God's people are now able to boldly approach the throne of grace in the name of Jesus without any human priest as mediator.

9:22-10:3

With that, let's dive into the text. Turn to **chapter 9**. We're going to start in **verse 22**. What's going on here is that God has just given all these directions I mentioned, and Aaron has followed all the directions.

And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

This is a real climax to the book so far. We've had 9 long chapters of what to do with dead animals, oil, fat, kidneys, flanks, livers, blood, fire, clean things, unclean things, priestly clothes, and the proper days to do it all on. There is exactness in all that God commanded. Then, in this amazing display, God shows that he has accepted the Israelites' worship. Of course the people fell on their faces.

But the story doesn't end there. Let's keep reading. **Chapter 10, verses 1-3.**

1 Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. 3 Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.

What does Moses mean that they offered "unauthorized" fire? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] Other translations call it "strange" fire, or "profane" fire. In short, it is fire, and worship, that God has not commanded. Aaron's sons have here decided to worship God their *own* way. They're *seeking* to worship God. They're not worshipping some false God. But they are worshipping God according to the dictates of their own hearts, not according to the way God has instructed. Their worship may have been well-intentioned. But good intentions are not what matters. Nadab and Abihu did not regard God as holy. They did not treat Him as distinct. Rather, they disobeyed and risked leading all of Israel into disobedience and were, therefore, punished. God will defend His name by guarding His holiness.

[Briefly Take Questions]

Chapters 11-15, 18-27: The Holiness Code—Then and Now

Let's move along to chapters 11-15 and 18-27 that's sometimes called the "Holiness Code." We'll deal with these two sections together. They are the chapters, maybe you've read them before, about which kinds of foods the Israelites can or can't eat, or even touch. There are laws concerning ritual cleanliness in childbirth and when someone has leprosy. There are directions about what to do if someone has a bodily discharge. There are even instructions about what to do if a bodily discharge touches a particular piece of pottery or wood. Now what in the world could be the significance of all that?

The answer is in **chapter 11, verses 44 and 45**, the first of an oft-reoccurring statement in Leviticus. Turn there with me.

"Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

The Israelites are to be holy because God is holy. The reason for all these commands is so that the Israelites can be holy, distinct, different - an accurate reflection of the God they represent.

This teaching is **all over Leviticus**, and we would do well to take it seriously. Look at **20:26**.

“You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”

There you hear the explicit setting apart from the other nations. **22:31-32**:

“So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the Lord. And you shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel.

Does anyone know what it means to “profane” God’s name? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] It means to treat as common or ordinary or mundane that which is really special and distinct. So God’s “name,” that is to say, His image and reputation, is tagged onto Israel. So they can’t be a people who take this identification with God lightly or irreverently.

God is giving them these commands so that in their everyday lives, they’ll be reminded that they are a holy nation, a people set apart for the Lord. God has written it into their very culture that wherever they turn, they will be reminded of their distinct status, and their call to be holy.

Now do we need to obey these laws? Do we need to pay attention to what we eat and touch and so forth in order to be holy, or in order to draw near to God? We’ll talk about this more in a few weeks, so no need to answer this question fully today. But in short, No. We are not the nation-state of Israel under the old covenant. We are not called to be a political-geographic-nation distinct from the other nations. All of the law was fulfilled in Christ. And these particular laws were fulfilled in Christ in such a way as to no longer govern us. That said, we are also to be a special people, set apart by and for the Lord. The Church is called to be holy for the same reason that Israel was. Israel bore the name of the One who delivered them from Egypt and bondage. And just like them, we proclaim with our lives the glories of the One who has delivered us out of the bondage of sin and death!³

³So the call to be holy remains, it just manifests itself in a different way in light of what Jesus has done, as He Himself says, “18”Are you so dull?” he asked. “Don’t you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’? 19 For it doesn’t go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body.” (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods “clean.”) 20 He went on: “What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ 21 For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, 22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. 23 All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’” (Mark 7.18-23) You see, the intent was never to make some legalistic standard that anyone could live up to by sheer force of will, but to remind the Israelites of how they are different. Now that the promised Messiah has come, the principle is the same, but the manifestation is different. We have things like baptism and the Lord’s supper to remind us of our uniqueness and special obligation to be ethically upright. So we focus on our hearts, and

1 Peter 1:14-16 14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

16:1-34: The Day of Atonement

So that was the holiness code. But you'll notice that we've skipped over the section sandwiched in the middle - the "grace" section of our outline as I laid it out at the beginning of class. That's where we'll focus now. In chapter 16, we find an annual ceremony for the Israelites. It's called the Day of Atonement. One day out of the year where God would provide a way by which everyone's sins would be covered - atoned for - and the nation made holy again.

We've already seen that the priests make sacrifices every day for all kinds of sins. But what about reconciliation? Is there any provision made for the people to be reunited with God after they've sinned? No. And that's where the Day of Atonement comes in. Reconciliation will require the sacrifice of a substitute and prayer on behalf of the people. Then the high priest will return to the people with the joyful declaration that their sins have been atoned for and that the people are now reconciled to God! Let's look at the Day of Atonement.

Look at verse **16:2**. "And the Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron your brother not to come at any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat that is on the ark, so that he may not die. For I will appear in the cloud over the mercy seat."

The Most Holy Place was the most inner part of the tabernacle. It was where God's very glory dwelt. Why would Aaron die if he went in? [WAIT FOR SOMEONE TO ANSWER] The glory of the Lord would crush him because of his sin. So the high priest can't just go in there whenever he wants to. Look at **verses 3-6**.

3 But in this way Aaron shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. 4 He shall put on the holy linen coat and shall have the linen undergarment on his body, and he shall tie the linen sash around his waist, and wear the linen turban; these are the holy garments. He shall bathe his body in water and then put them on. 5 And he shall take from the congregation of the people of Israel two male goats for a sin offering, and one ram

we guard our hearts, so that we can be different in areas such as evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

for a burnt offering. 6 “Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

First, Aaron must atone for his own sins. That’s verse 11. Only with a sacrifice of atonement can he enter into the Most Holy Place. But he still has to do so very carefully. Look at **verses 13-14**.

And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small, and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die.

The smoke was meant to cover the glory of the Lord so that it wouldn’t lash out and consume him!

Now that his own sins are covered he can commence his role as representing the people and interceding for the people. First he’ll take two goats to the entrance. One goat is used for a sin offering for the entire nation, and the other will serve as a scapegoat. Then, after Aaron has atoned for his own sins, he can make atonement for the people. That’s verse 15. Then verses 16-19 show that the blood of the sin offering is for cleansing the Most Holy Place, the tabernacle, and the altar that are defiled because of the people’s sins.

Next, Aaron will deal with the scapegoat. Look at **verses 21-22**. “And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.”

This was a powerful visual parable. The people would all see their sins being transferred to the head of this goat, and watch as their sins were, metaphorically, taken away – never to be seen again!

This ritual was to be performed once a year. Every year. As verse 30 says, it is a “statute forever.”

It was a serious and solemn day. And at the same time, it was a joyous occasion because on this day all the sins of the nation were forgiven and they were reconciled to God. It is still a very important day on the Jewish calendar. It’s called Yom Kipper.

Now, why did I take you through all that detail? Well, think about it. All that to do. All that blood. Such a tedious process year after year. Great that sins were forgiven, but it would have to be done again the next year. Blood is all over the place, and everyone has to come watch.

How serious God must take sin! All this emphasizes God's holiness. It emphasizes the people's sinfulness. It this emphasizes God's grace. And all this emphasizes that it doesn't really work. Jump ahead to Hebrews, chapter 10.

1 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

The author of Hebrews continues, explaining that the priests performed their duties endlessly - because the problem of sin was never solved. But Jesus? "When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."

His work, as he said on the cross, was FINISHED. We are justified in His sight!

So why is the Day of Atonement the centerpiece of the book of Leviticus? Because the law was never intended to be something that would be kept perfectly by anyone except Jesus. It was there to show our need for a Savior. And the Day of Atonement was the clearest expression of that.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

Part 1 Conclusion and Application

The call to be holy is a serious one, and we hear it with great sobriety. But we hear it as people who are aware of our sin and in need of atonement outside of ourselves. We look to Jesus to establish our standing before the Lord. We will never reach God's perfect standard of holiness this side of heaven, and so we need the Lord Jesus Christ; we need the gospel. Then with the grace God gives, we can live distinct lives - lives of faith and obedience.

Let's make two points of application before we close. First, feel the weight of sin. If there is one thing made perfectly clear in the book of Leviticus, it is that our sin has massive consequences and can only be properly dealt with through the shedding of blood. And keep in mind, as we read in Hebrews, that even all of this never fully dealt with sin. All the sacrifices, all the regulations,

all the warnings, all the prohibitions, and all the commands found in this book have a single purpose. To drive us to God's provision for our sins. Ultimately, what's this provision? It's the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross! Be encouraged once again by the author of the book of Hebrews:

Hebrews 10:19-23 19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

[PRAY]

Part 2: Numbers

As we move into the second half of our study today, we are about a quarter of the way through our study of the Old Testament, looking at every book from a 50,000 foot perspective to understand its message and main themes. With each book we are looking forward into the New Testament to see how the Old Testament teaches us about the Gospel – the good news about Jesus Christ, His Church, and Heaven to come. In fact, as we get into this morning's study of this fourth book of the Bible, Numbers, we'll be looking at each of those themes.

[PRAY]

Context for Numbers

Let's start with context. Numbers comes after the Exodus, when God's people, the Israelites, leave Egypt. And they've just received the Ten Commandments at Sinai. But we haven't quite reached the Promised Land, and so we're still before the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.

In Numbers we'll see the people of Israel pack up camp from the foot of Mount Sinai and move toward the land of Canaan, the fertile land just east of the Mediterranean Sea. If you look at your handout you'll see a map of the Israelite journey. The route is only 200 miles, but the narrative

will span 40 years, because, as we'll see, the people don't go straight into the land. Instead, they wander around in the wilderness. By breaking the chapters up geographically, we see chapters 1-10 are about packing up at Sinai, chapters 11-12 about the journey to Kadesh where the people rebel, chapters 13-19 explain the wanderings in the wilderness, and chapters 20-21 describe the journey to the plains of Moab. Finally, in chapters 22-36, we'll see that Israel is camped on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, looking across the river at the Promised Land [map in handout].

But this book isn't just about God's people finding a place to live. If we widen the aperture a bit, we'll remember that this story fits into the far bigger question of how God's promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. In Genesis 12 (and in 15 and 17) God makes many promises to Abraham. Let me highlight the four key ones which we'll track through Numbers:

1. He promises that His people will have a **place**. "All the land that you see I will give to you" (13v15).
2. He promises that the Israelites, His **people**, the offspring of Abraham, will be numerous "a great nation" (12v2), "as the dust of the earth" (13v16) "as stars in the sky" (15v5).
3. He also promises his **presence**. Genesis 15v1.
4. Finally, God promises that through the Israelites, all nations will be **blessed**. "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (12v3).

The book of Numbers is crucial in understanding redemptive history because it is the first time (since Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden) that we've seen the possibility of all four of these promises coming true. The **people** of God are attempting to occupy a **place** where they can enjoy God's **presence** and so be a **blessing** to the nations.

But of course, these four don't finally come together until Revelation 21. So we know right up front that Numbers, in that sense, is a false start. But what's significant is why these four don't come together. ***Can anyone answer that question in a single word?*** [Unbelief.]

Right. In short, two thematic ideas are juxtaposed against one another in the book of Numbers.

- One is the present problems - the unbelief, rebellion, and disobedience of the people.
- Then, over against that are Yahweh's faithfulness to his past promises – his patience and grace.

And the big question that we face here is, "What's gonna win?" "Will God's promises prevail in the midst of disobedience, distrust and unbelief?"

The answer, and a good theme sentence for the book, would be...

Past promises will prevail in spite of present problems

OK - that's what we're going to see in this book. But to make sure we're viewing this time as application and not just academic, let's talk about this a bit. ***Why would we need to be reminded that God's past promises will prevail in spite of present problems?***

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

So - back to Numbers. We're going to break the book into three pieces based on three major themes that support the summary statement I just gave you.

- In chapter 1 to chapter 10 we see **God preparing** his people for the fulfillment of his promises.
- In chapter 11 to chapter 16 we see **God punishing** his people for their great unbelief and lack of trust in his promises being fulfilled.
- And in chapters 17 to 36 we see **God's patience** with his people. Perhaps most importantly, we learn that his promises will be fulfilled in spite of everything that has taken place.

So first, let's look at these initial chapters and see how

God's preparation preserves his promises (1-10)

At the start of these first ten chapters God's people are still at the foot of Mount Sinai, ready to break camp. The mood is very optimistic. This was it! They'd received the laws, they're in covenant with Yahweh, He dwells among them, and now they're going up to take the land of Canaan. These chapters are full of anticipation. Let's dive in and see how the first three promises to Abraham are being fulfilled⁴.

First with regard to God's **people** we see God's promise of a great nation taking form. Chapter 1, we read about a census to count how many men are able to fight in the army. As you can see from Numbers 1 verse 46 (or 2v32) God's people are becoming a huge nation with "603,550 men able to go to war"⁵.

Second, we see God's promise of a **place** taking shape. Once the preparations have been made we see God's people on the move.

⁴You could make a point that when Moses' father-in-law (a Midianite) joins them, they are beginning to be a blessing to the nations, promise #4

⁵Not only that but in the census of the priests in chapters 3-4 we see that there are "8580 priests" (4v48).

Between those two periods of census (chapters 1-4) and setting out (chapter 10), we also see God's people being primed for the fullness of his **presence**. As we saw in Exodus, the people cannot draw near to God unless they are clean. So in chapters 5 and 6 we see the camp being cleansed; in chapter 7, the tabernacle is consecrated; and in chapter 8v5, we see the priests being inducted into their roles.

However, chapters 9 and 10, also, center on God's presence with his people when they move. In chapter 9 we see God's presence in the form of a fire and a cloud over the tabernacle. Look with me at Numbers 9v15-17:

15 On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. 16 So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. 17 And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped.

And as we see in chapter 2, the camp is designed so that the tabernacle, and its accompanying cloud or pillar of fire, is always right in the middle. So the people are always reminded that Yahweh is dwelling with them in the very center of their camp.

I guess it's easy for many of us to feel somewhat envious of how close these people lived to God's visible presence. "If only I could live with that fiery cloud always in view!" But of course, we need to remember that as Christians we don't live in a camp that's indwelt by God; we ourselves are indwelt by his Spirit. We have his very Word in our hands. We are far more blessed than they were.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

So in summary, this is all exhilarating stuff! Everything looks good. The numerous people are obedient, and they have Yahweh visibly guiding them to His land.

But then suddenly, starting in chapter 11, things change.

God's punishment preserves his promises (11-16)

"Complain" is the word that appears in nearly every one of the next six chapters. In spite of reason for great optimism, God's people are grumbling. In chapter 11v1 they complain about their "hardships". In chapter 11v13 they complain about their food. In chapter 12 Miriam and

Aaron, Moses' own brother and sister "talk against him" (v.1). Finally, in chapter 13, we come to the worst transgression, for it's here that God's people show that they do not trust that God will give them the land.

In this famous chapter, Yahweh has instructed Moses to send spies into the land. Twelve spies went in. On their return, here was their report (verses 27-28):

"We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there."

That wasn't exactly the report that Moses was hoping they'd bring back. Caleb's report in verse 30 is more like it:

But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, "Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it."

Those are the words of faith, and trust in God's promises!

But of the 12 spies, only Caleb and Joshua responded in faith. The ten other spies complained that victory was impossible. And, sadly, it wasn't only the spies who lacked faith. Listen to the response of the people in chapter 14:

1 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. 2 And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! 3 Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" 4 And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

OK so it's mutiny! And worse, they want to return to slavery! As Moses and Aaron are quick to point out their rebellion is against the Lord (14v7). They don't want to be a separate people, they don't want a separate land, they don't want to bless the nations, they don't want God's presence!

Now, it's worth pausing here to reflect on the roots of their sin and often our own sin. Notice the constant connection between their dissatisfaction and their sin. Complaining reveals an underlying spiritual state. The people are given supernatural food they don't have to work for. They've been miraculously rescued from Egypt without having to fight a single battle. They

have a faithful leader. They have God's law. It's easy to see how they've been blessed and how inappropriate their complaining is. But how often do we have a similar attitude? Sinful dissatisfaction tells us more about our souls than our circumstances. Beware of discontentment.

So, back to Numbers, what are results of all this discontentment? Well, when it's complaints at hardships God sends fire to burn the camp (11v1); when it's complaints at food God sends a plague (11v33); when it's Miriam complaining, God sends leprosy (12v10); but when it's a total lack of trust in all God's promises, well, Yahweh is having none of it! His wrath is kindled. Look at how He protects Moses and pronounces His sentence against the people, chapter 14v10-12. Listen for God's anger with their lack of faith:

10 Then all the congregation said to stone them [that is, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb] with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel. 11 And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? 12 I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they."

And so, just like with the golden calf in Exodus, Yahweh is ready to blot them out.

A long way from the first ten chapters, don't you think? What a tragedy! And it's because of their lack of faith in God's promises.

But it's here that we have another opportunity to see the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Moses again prefigures and foreshadows Christ by what he does next. Moses pleads for the people (verses 13-19), basing his appeal in God's desire for his own glory and fame. As a result, God forgives them, verse 20, and doesn't destroy them.

But the people's unbelief is serious. As a result there are real punishments for God's people. Look at the next few verses in 21-23:

"I have pardoned, according to your word. 21 But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, 22 none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, 23 shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it.

OK, so what connection is there between this punishment and God's promises? On the surface it seems as though God's punishment is breaking his promises. But we need to remember that God, back in Exodus, declared to these very people that they would only be blessed if they kept

his covenant and obeyed. If they didn't, they would be cursed. So God is in fact keeping his promise. God had promised to punish their lack of faith.

But what about the Abrahamic promises. Where are we in relation to these?

Well, in relation to the promise of God's people - it seems that God's people are no more. Not one of them "shall see the land I promised to their forefathers" verse 23 said. Nevertheless, if we jump to down to verse 31 of chapter 14 we can see that God is still going to achieve the promises to his people. Verse 31 says - "But your little ones, who you said would become a prey, I will bring in, and they shall know the land that you have rejected." What irony! And with this there is still hope.

With this in mind, the promised **place** is still just about in sight. But the land would not be not be inherited by the faithless. In fact in verse 25, of chapter 14, we get perhaps the most depressing verse in the whole of Numbers. "turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea". In other words "Go back to where you came from!" So the promise of a place would wait for another generation because of their lack of faith.

Hebrews 3 applies this tragedy directly to us. I'll read it to you:

16 For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? 17 And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? 18 And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? 19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Hebrews tells us to take the experience of Israel as a very stern warning to us. Just like them, we've heard the gospel - but we've heard it so much more clearly. You can be exposed to much grace, much Biblical teaching - and still miss God's place. And of course, missing God's place may have cost the Israelites the promised land; it would cost us heaven. You must have faith, and you must persevere in faith until the end. Don't let sin and unbelief deceive you and lead you to make shipwreck of the faith. Don't play with fire; you're not in heaven yet; persevere in faith!

So that's all about place. But thirdly, it's worth noting that God's **presence** is still with them. God hasn't left them. He continues to speak to Moses in chapter 15, and in chapter 16 verses 41-42, in spite of continued grumbling, God reveals himself in glory to them in a cloud.

In this section, we see little interaction with other people, although it is noteworthy that the because of the Israelites' sin their ability to be a **blessing** to the nations is quite diminished.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

OK, on to our final section. So far we've seen how God **prepares** the people for the fulfilment of his promises in chapters 1-10. Then, in chapters 11-16, we saw how the people fail to trust and therefore how that they are **punished** in keeping with God's promises. However, in the final chapters we see God's **patience** with his people in order that his promises might prevail.

God's patience preserves his promises (17-36)

We may have thought that God's punishment and justice would have been enough to quell the rebellion and dissatisfaction in the Israelite camp. However, as we start this new section it's quickly apparent that God's people continue in their sin and disbelief. In chapter 17, the people misrepresent what God says. In verse 13, the people cry, "Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die!" which is clearly not true.

Then in chapter 20, we discover that not even Moses is immune to the sinful dishonoring of Lord, since he, in a fit of anger, strikes a rock rather than speaking to it as God had told him to do (verse 8-12). And so Moses receives the same punishment as this generation of Israelites.

In Numbers 21, we are back to the heart of their discontentment. Let's start reading at verse 4.

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."

There they are again grumbling against Yahweh and His appointed leader, Moses. And as always, this sin cannot go unpunished. So in verse 6, God sends venomous snakes into the camp.

What happens next? The people repent, and seek an intercessor - Moses - to go to the Lord to plead for mercy.

Are you noticing the pattern here that is throughout the book of Numbers? The people sin; God displays his right anger; there is a need for a mediator, there is need for God's patience.

Well how will this example show God's patience? Let's look on at verses 8-9 The LORD said to Moses,

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it

on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Now, clearly what's going on here in Numbers 21 is a miracle. Yahweh in his great patience is supernaturally healing these people. But look at the grounds upon which He does it. "Looking" at the snake is the act of obedience that comes from faith in what God has provided. That is to say, if God has given this bronze snake as the means to the cure, then just merely looking at it, as they are told, is an act of trusting in God's provision for the healing and forgiveness of sins.

In the same way, we are called again to trust in God's provision for salvation. The cross of Jesus Christ was God's idea. It was God's design. It was given to us as the one and only way to be saved from our sins – the disbelieving and distrusting and disobeying that we are guilty of all the time. If you seek some other means of salvation, it won't work. Only belief in what God has provided, His Son dying for your sins, will suffice to rescue you from hell. And in that way Christ is a greater Savior, the way of salvation that God has provided for all who would believe.

Just listen to what Jesus says in John 3:14-15, the verses before one of the most famous verses in the whole Bible... "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

So, the Lord's promises continue to prevail in the midst of present problems. Indeed from this point onwards we see God's incredible patience with his people, which enable his past promises to Abraham to be fulfilled. Let's look again at those four key promises and track them through the remaining 15 chapters.

With regard to **people** we see that God's patience enables God's people to prosper and grow in size. Through the strange account of Balaam in chapters 22-24. God's people are promised future blessing, even against a backdrop of shocking idolatry and immorality at Moab, in chapter 25. In fact by the time we reach chapter 26 we see that God's people, in spite of plagues, fires, and war, are still a considerable nation. This second census reveals (verse 51) that there are "601, 730" men which is almost exactly the same number that we had in Numbers 1.

Secondly, we see that patience with his people results in God's **place** being reached. In chapter 27, we discover that Joshua will lead God's people into the land. Indeed in chapter 32, the first tribes settle just east of the Promised Land. Then, in chapter 34, God gives the people instructions for assigning the land to the Israelite clans. In the final chapter, chapter 36, we see how special provisions are made for how the land will remain with each tribe. God's past promises are coming through.

In relation to **presence**, God is still with them! In chapter 29 – we discover that there is to be a

feast of trumpets – where (verse 1) the Israelites are to remember God’s presence with a whole day of trumpet blowing.

But what of God’s promise of **blessing** to the nations? If anything don’t we see God people being a curse to the nations? After all in chapter 21 the Canaanites and Amorites are destroyed by God’s people, in chapters 22-24 the Moabites lose their possessions to God’s people, and in chapter 31 vengeance is taken on the Midianites.

Nevertheless, we must again turn to the Abrahamic covenant Genesis 12v3 says this: “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Balaam, in Numbers 24:9, uses almost the exact phrasing when he says to Israelites, “Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you.”

The implication is that nations who treat Israel generously, who do not reject his people and his Word, will be blessed.

Conclusion

Well then, we’ve reached the end of the book and it’s time to conclude. The message of Numbers is this: God prepares his people for the fulfilment of his promises, but the people are punished since they do not believe his promises. Nevertheless God’s patience sees that his promises will prevail and will come to pass. As God’s people today we face similar problems. We are sometimes tempted to question whether God’s promises will come true. We perhaps wonder if God will use us in the building up of his people, the church. We question the reality of heaven given all the hardship earth has to offer. We forget that God is with us. So just like Hebrews tells us, we need to keep these people in mind as an example - an example of what not to do - so that we can trust in our God. Because just like we see in Numbers, his promises will always prevail.

[TAKE QUESTIONS]

[PRAY]

This material is adapted from a course with the same name developed by Capitol Hill Baptist Church. It has been modified for our purposes and has been condensed to fit our time schedule. The original version is available on their website at <https://www.capitolhillbaptist.org/resources/core-seminars/series/old-testament-overview/>