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A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BIBLE

Reading: Numbers 13:26-33

5. NUMBERS

One day towards the close of the 18th century a gentlemen and lady sat side by side in a stage coach as it rumbled its way through the English countryside. The lady appeared to be occupied with the content of the book in her hand, at times reading from its open pages, at times meditating on what she had just read. She was obviously enjoying her meditation, the words of a lovely hymn,

**Come Thou fount of every blessing
Tune my heart to sing Thy praise
Streams of mercy never ceasing
Call for songs of loudest praise**

She turned to the gentleman, to her a stranger, and sought to interest him, in what was thrilling her soul. Holding before him the open page she asked if he knew the hymn. At first he appeared embarrassed and a little annoyed, then he tried to avoid her question but she persisted telling him of the blessing the words had brought to her heart. After a period of silence he burst into tears, “*Madam,*” he said “*I am the poor unhappy man who composed that hymn many years ago and I would give a thousand worlds if I had them to enjoy the feelings I had then.*” The man on the stage coach was Robert Robinson (1735-1790)

and the hymn was the product of his pen some thirty years previously. My Robert Robinson was “*Prone to wander,*” he was “*prone to leave.*” But the record tells us that in life’s eventide, he experienced, the restoring grace of God. Are we not all prone to wander and prone to leave the God we love ? The bent of the human heart is ever to stray from the pathway of fellowship with God, but over against every human departure and every human wandering there is restoring grace. Now the book of Numbers is all about “*wandering.*” And it has special significance for us today. Again and again this book is referred to in the New Testament. Indeed the Holy Spirit has called special attention to it in that classic statement concerning Israel’s early history. He says,

“ Moreover brethren I would not that ye should be ignorant how that all our fathers were under the cloud and all passed through the sea. And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. And did all eat the same spiritual meat. And did all drink the same spiritual drink for they drank of that rock that followed them and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples to the intent we should not lust after evil things even as they lusted.”
(1 Cor 10:1-6)

Now the word “*examples,*” is types (tupoi) in other words the things recorded in the book of Numbers “*are made immortal by their having been Divinely resolved into types for our learning.*” (Baxter) You see, **Canaan represents God’s full purpose for His people.** At

Kadesh- Barnea Israel failed to enter into their Inheritance. Instead of claiming Canaan by faith, they wandered in the wilderness in unbelief. How like us ? Sure, we have been delivered from Egypt by the blood of the Lamb, but we have not yet entered into our inheritance in Christ. Yes, we are saved but we have not fulfilled God's purpose for our lives. We have not trusted God to overcome the giants, knock down the walls, and give us the inheritance that He has promised. We are just wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. Wasted years. Is this your life ? You see,

1. Numbers is a very Sad Book:

One commentator has said “ *It should have taken them 11 days to travel from Egypt to the Promised Land but it actually took them 13,780 days.* ” Do you recall that only two of them who set out reached their home. The rest were stuck in aimless living, “ *killing time,* ” until the judgment of the Lord was complete. Over time they all died in the wilderness and a new generation took up the journey. For

2. Number is a very Statistical Book:

It's full of numbers. Take the title. In the Hebrew the title is always taken from the first words of the scroll. “ *And the Lord spake unto Moses,* ” (1:1) When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, the translators gave it a new title, Arithmoi from which we get the word “ arithmetic.” Latin translators gave the book the title numeri, in English we know it as Numbers. You see, the

book begins and ends with two censuses. The first was taken when Israel left Sinai one month after the tabernacle had been erected. (Ex 40:17 Num 1:1) The second was taken when they arrived at Moab prior to entering the land of Canaan almost 40 years later. These were male censuses used for military conscription. So the book of Numbers tells us that there is nothing wrong with counting. David was punished by the Lord for counting his men but this was because he was motivated by pride. Other parts of the Bible include examples of counting and taking stock, we are told for example of the 3,000 that were saved on the day of Pentecost. Christ encouraged His disciples to count the cost of following Him. Now,

3. The Time Line of the Book:

Is important.

(a) The Passover occurred on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year and the nation departed from Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month. (Num 33:3; Ex 12:2, 6)

(b) The tabernacle was erected at Mount Sinai exactly one year after the Exodus, on the first day of the first month of the second year. (Ex 40:2, 17)

(c) One month later the nation prepared to leave Sinai for the Promised Land, on the first day of the second month of the second year. (Num 1:1)

(d) On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year “ *the cloud was taken up from off the*

tabernacle of the testimony, and the children of Israel took their journeys out of the wilderness of Sinai.”
(Num 10:11-12)

(e) The book of Deuteronomy opens with a reference to the first day of the eleventh month of the 40th year. This is 38 years, eight months and ten days after the nation departed from Sinai (Deut 1:3; cf. Num 10:11-12) That means, that Numbers covers a period of time known as the wilderness wanderings which lasted 38 years, nine months and ten days.

Now that’s a lot for us all to take in. Maybe we could simplify all this by saying that perhaps the book would be better known by its Hebrew name (bemidhbar) which means “ *in the wilderness*,” for this is the setting from “ *the wilderness of Sinai*,” (1:1) to the “ *wilderness of Paran*,” (10:12) this is where Kadesh barnea was, and finally on to “ *the plains of Moab*.” (22:1) Now this means we can divide the book geographically.

(1) FROM SINAI TO KADESH BARNEA (Ch’s 1-12)

The key word here is **WALKING**. You see, Numbers takes up where the book of Exodus leaves of. And just as Exodus is connected with Genesis and Leviticus with Exodus so Numbers is connected with Leviticus. Do you see how the book opens ? “ *And the Lord spake*,” (1:1) Now in Leviticus the subject is the believer’s worship, but in Numbers it is the believers walk. Leviticus speaks of purity but Numbers speak of pilgrimage.

Leviticus speaks of our spiritual position but Numbers speaks of our spiritual progress. In the one the Sanctuary is prominent, and in the other the Wilderness is prominent. Indeed this is exactly where the book opens “ *in the wilderness of Sinai*.” (1:1) And here we see,

(a) THE NATION COUNTED: (Ch’s 1-4)

Look at (1:2 -3) The wording here makes it clear that the primary purpose of the numbering was a military one. It gives us the man power of the newly formed nation. The total being 603,550 and it’s on the basis of this adult male census that the sum of the whole nation is reckoned at 2.5 million people. I mean how do you organize that kind of number ? Well, our God is a God of semblance and order. He does nothing haphazardly, or half-heartedly. With meticulous detail, He positions each tribe while they are in the camp and when they are on the move. Always the tabernacle had to be central. Encamped, three tribes are located on each of the four sides of the tabernacle. On the move six tribes, those to the east and south, move out first. The tabernacle follows. The six remaining tribes, those dwelling to the west and north, bring up the rear.

My what a spectacle this must have been, for when the camp set out on a journey everyone moved according to a fascinating pattern. Moreover, the Levites were given to assist Aaron and the priests in the duties of the tabernacle. (3:5-13) We might ask, *why is God so fussy about all these details ?* I think the word was saying “ *Be careful, for I am in your midst*.” What a timely word for us in our day and generation. For if ever “ *carelessness*,” pertained

to the things of God it is today. I suppose a modern word for this would be “*casualness*,” the “*any old thing will do for God*,” attitude. Has that attitude permeated your life ? Have you been casual in relation to prayer, the Word, worship, evangelism? Now as well, as being carefully arranged the camp had to be spotlessly clean for these were “*God’s people*,” and so we see,

(b) *THE NATION COUNSELLED: Ch’s 5-10*)

You see, if the first chapters give us the outward formation of the camp, the next five deals with the inward condition. The key verse is (5:3) where God says, “*that they defile not their camps in the midst whereof I dwell.*” The Holy One Himself being in the midst of that camp, the camp must be holy. So

Ch 5 commands that lepers be quarantined outside the camp.

Ch 6 gives us the regulations concerning the Nazarite vow a voluntary vow of dedication to God.

Ch 7 brings before us the free will offerings of the princes

Ch 8 describes the consecration of the priests

Ch 9 shows us the people keeping the Passover

Ch 10 brings before us the trumpets of silver, for as the pillar give guidance for the eye, the trumpets give guidance for the ear.

What can we learn from all this ? That we need to be “*vessels unto honour, sanctified and meet for the master’s use.*” (2 Tim 2:21) One thing that has struck me

time and again going through the opening books of the Bible is “*that cleanliness is next to godliness.*” Do you not think that has some support from this book of Numbers ? A dirty uncared for home is an insult to God. A dirty uncared for Christian is an insult to God. Yes, God wants us clean spiritually but He wants us clean physically too. (Ch 19) It’s a testimony to His presence in our midst. So the nation was counted, then counseled and then we see,

(c) *THE NATION CHASTISED: (Ch’s 11-12)*

Do you see how (Ch 11) opens ? Think of it, after only three days journey the people are complaining. Do you know what Paul said about these years ? He said this “*about the time of forty years suffered he their manners in the wilderness.*” (Acts 13:18) What ill manner children they were. Someone has suggested that a better title for Numbers would be, “*The Book of Murmurings.*” Do you know what their biggest problem was ? The same problem as ours. It’s called murmuring. I mean the Israelites were constantly moaning. We have seven distinct episodes of grumbling and moaning from (Chs’ 11-21) You see, the children of Israel complained about

1. The Journey: (11:1-3)

2. The Food: (11:4-6)

3. The Giants: (13:33-14:3)

4. The Leaders: (16:3)

5. The Divine Judgement: (16:41)

6. The Desert: (20:2-5)

7. The Manna: 11:6 21:5)

No doubt they were stimulated by “ *the mixt multitude,*” who came out of Egypt with them. (11:4 Ex 12:38) These were people who had witnessed the power of God displayed on Israel’s behalf but they had never been “ *under the blood,*” themselves and they were a constant irritant in the camp. Do you know folk like that ? My lets nail this was for what it is. *Murmuring is a serious sin.* So serious that God came down in judgment in the midst of His camp. Sidlow Baxter says, “ Those who murmur without cause are soon given cause to murmur.”

Paul says, “ *Do all things without murmurings and disputings.*” (Phil 2:14) Let me give you a word about murmuring. Don’t do it. Paul says, “ *Neither murmur ye as some of them also murmured and were destroyed of the destroyer.*” (1 Cor 10:10) You see, you need to talent to grumble, you need no brains to grumble, you need no character to grumble, you need no self denial to set up the grumbling business. Have you discovered that’s its one of the easiest things in the world to do ? These people thought that because God was in the tabernacle He did not know what they said when they went to their own tents. What a big mistake. My is that what you are thinking ? When I go outside into the carpark, and groan to my cronies about the pastor and elders God does not hear ? Does He not ? Grumbling probably does more damage to the people of God than any other sin. (1)

(2) FROM KADESH BARNEA TO KADESH BARNEA (Ch’s 13-19)

The key word here is WANDERING. Now look at

(12:16) This is where Kadesh Barnea was. (13:26) Old Sidlow Baxter says, “ *It only took forty hours to get Israel out of Egypt but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel.*” My within two years the people of Israel were at Kadesh Barnea, the gate of Canaan. Thirty eight years later they were at it again, at the very same spot. Why ? Well, they trusted the Lord to bring them out of Egypt but failed to trust Him to bring them into Canaan. You see, Kadesh became a watershed in every sense of the term. It is a name written in flaming letters, for Kadesh proved a turning point in the entire enterprise so far as that whole generation was concerned. Before Kadesh the children of Israel were pilgrims advancing with purpose at the commandment of the Lord.

After Kadesh they were simply wanderers going around in circles. They were like the proverbial door on its hinges, all the time moving backwards and forwards, but never getting anywhere. *It was only when they had come full circle and were brought back again to Kadesh, that the Lord moved to bring the new or second generation of the people into the land of Canaan by the hand of Joshua.* (Num 20:1) Israel’s downfall at Kadesh is a solemn reminder to us today that it’s a dangerous thing to trifle with the will of God. My you may end up spending your life wandering around just waiting to die. You see, sooner or later, each of us will face our own Kadesh-Barnea crisis, when we will have to make a choice. Will we press on to the Canaan life of victory, or will we return to the purposeless and unsatisfying life of the desert ? *Now Canaan is often referred to as representing heaven. But this can be only so in the rather limited sense that*

Canaan came at the end of the journey. Its real significance is much more immediate. Canaan represents God's full purpose for his people. He would not only bring Israel out of Egypt, and through the desert, He would also bring them into Canaan. In the same way, the Lord has much more in mind for us than that our salvation should simply be an escape from hell. Bless God, it is that, but it's much more. His purpose in saving me said Paul was "*to reveal His Son in me.*" (Gal 1:6) The same apostle declared in another place, "*whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*" (Rom 8:29) This means that there can be no finality to Christian experience in this life. On the contrary, there is a constant pressing on towards the mark. (Phil 3:14)

You see, the spiritual equivalent to that generation missing the land, is not that present day believers may miss heaven at the last. *Rather, it is the very real possibility of missing the full purpose of our calling in the present, of failing to realise in the here and now, that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.* My have you come a certain distance in spiritual things, only to vegetate in a kind of spiritual vacuum ? Have you become like a stagnant pool, rather than like a watered garden ? My Kadesh-Barnea carries a solemn warning for us all. Are we going backward or forward ? Is it to be the old life of failure or the new life of fruitfulness ? Lets this have a look at Israel this on the borders of Canaan at Kadesh Barnea and notice,

(a) *THE REQUEST BY THE PEOPLE:*

Where did the idea of sending forth the spies come from ? Look if you will at (Deut 1:19-23) Sending the spies therefore, was an idea that appears to have originated with the people. The Lord seemingly condescended to their request and Moses too, went along with the idea. But why should twelve men be sent into Canaan to spy out the land ? The Israelites already knew what kind of land it was for God had already more than once described it as "*a land flowing with milk and honey.*" (Exod 3:8) To Moses the prophet the Lord said, "*And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.*" (3:8) My was God's promise concerning this land not sufficient ? Was His description of this land not enough ? Apparently not so Israel come with this proposal. "*We will send men before us and they shall search us out the land.*" (1:22)

My sometimes the Lord allows us to carry out our own unbelieving plans to our own confusion. If we will "*lean on our own understanding,*" (Prov 3:5) the Lord sometimes lets us take our own way until we discover what utter folly our fancied wisdom is. You see, this request originated in the will of man. (a)

(b) *THE REPORT TO THE PEOPLE:*

The exploring team was split. There was the Timorous Ten, and the Triumphant Two. Do you recall what the ten

said ? “ *The people be strong.* ” “ *The cities are walled.* ”
“ *We be not able to go against the people.* ” “ *And there we saw the giants.* ” The Bible says “ *And they brought up an evil report of the land.* ” (13:32) Evil, not because it was untrue, but because it left God out of the picture. What a contrast they were to Caleb and Joshua. I mean look at (13:30) Now Caleb and Joshua had seen all that the ten saw. They neither underestimated their foes, nor minimised the magnitude of the task. The difference was just this. The ten matched the strength of the giants with their own strength, the two matched the strength of the giants with the omnipotence of God. The ten gazed at the giants, the two gazed at God. The ten saw the foes, the two saw the fruit. The ten saw the problems, the two saw the promises of God.

*Ten men who failed to see God
Saw cities impregnably high
Two men, looking off unto God
Saw doom for those cities draw nigh*

*Ten men who failed to see God
Discouraged their fellow-men
Two men perceived God everywhere
Are you one of the two or the ten ?*

How did it all end ? Well look at,

(c) *THE REACTION OF THE PEOPLE:*

What a picture we have in (Num Ch 14) the people are weeping, murmuring, rebelling “ *Let us make a captain*

and return into Egypt. ” (14:4) The Lord responds by saying, “ *How long will it be ere they believe Me.* ” (14:11) God’s judgement was threefold. (1) The nation would wander for 40 years, one for each day the spies had explored the land. (2) During that time the older generation, twenty years and upward would die and not enter the land, except for Caleb and Joshua. (3) The ten unbelieving spies died because of the evil report they delivered. (14:37) The Jews had lamented that they wanted to die in the wilderness (14:2) and they had complained that their children would die in Canaan (14:3), but God had declared that their children would live in Canaan and the adults would die in the wilderness. Out of their own mouths God passed judgement.

My be careful what you say to the Lord when you complain, He may take you up on it. Do you know something ? *Moses led the world’s longest funeral march, and Caleb and Joshua watched their generation die.* Dr. Leon Wood makes the following observation,

Figuring 1,200,000 as having to die in 38 and a half years, gives 85 per day. Figuring 12 hours per day maximum for funerals gives an average of seven funerals per hour for all 38 and a half years a continuous foreboding of God’s punishment on them.”

Malcolm’s Funeral Directors would have made a fortune. Does God deal with His people in chastisement when they sin ? Yes. Only two out of the original multitude that left Egypt came into the promised land. Did they learn from it ? Not a bit for when we come into (Ch 16) we see,

(d) THE REBELLION FROM THE PEOPLE:

At least from Korah, and 250 of the princes of Israel. Korah was a cousin of Moses (6:21) a Levite who was not content to assist in the tabernacle he wanted to serve as priest as well. (6:10) It appears that Korah and his followers defied Aaron, while Dathan, Abiram, questioned the authority of Moses. However, they were united in their plot. These men wanted to “ *lift themselves up,*” before the congregation. Certainly the whole nation was holy to God, but He had placed some people in positions of leadership as He willed. The same is true of the church today. All saints are beloved of God, but some have been given spiritual gifts and spiritual offices for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:14-18)

Yet somehow rebellion, against God’s Word, God’s house, and God’s men is more prevalent today than any other day of history. People do not want to recognize, regard, or respect spiritual, moral, or pastoral authority, even when that authority has the best interests of the people at heart. Yet God says, “ *Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves for they watch for your souls as they that must give account.*” (Heb 13:17)

Now when we come to (Ch 20) we must remember that the 38 years of wandering are past and we now enter the third great movement of the book,

(3) FROM KADESH BARNEA TO MOAB Ch’s 20-36

The keyword here is **WAITING**. The old generation is no more. A new generation is arisen. Aaron is gone and Eleazar is appointed high priest. Moses is soon to go and Joshua is soon to come. Israel is to move over to the plains of Moses and get ready for entry into the Promised Land. Do you see (20:22) This was a mountain on the border of Edom. You see they are on the move again, thus in this closing section of the book we are taken up with,

(a) THEIR JOURNEYING: (Ch’s 21-25)

The journey from Kadesh to Moab would take about four to five months. (20:9 33:38 Deut 1:3-5) Do you see what (22:1) says ? Balak, the king of Moab becomes increasingly disturbed. He does not want the Israelites as his neighbours so he sends for Balaam, a false prophet to curse the Israelites as they draw close to his realm. Few men in the Bible raise as many questions as Balaam. The New Testament talks about,

1.The Way of Balaam: “ *who loved the wages of unrighteousness,*” (2 Pet 2:15)

2. The Error of Balaam: for he concluded that God would have to curse Israel because of their many sins.

3. The Doctrine of Balaam: “ *who cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel to eat things sacrificed unto idols and to commit fornications.*” (Rev 2:14)

Three times he tried to curse the people of God, but each time only blessings not cursing came out. (Num Ch 22-24) So he decided that if could not get curse

them he would get God to do so. So he hatched a plot ? Do you know it was ? **Women.** (Num 25:1-3, 31:16) Balaam instructed Balak to place sensuous women before the marching Israelite army. He did and they wilted. Before they knew it they lay down with dogs and got up with the devil's fleas. Soon they went to church with these women and worshipped their idols. The result ? God slew 24,000 Israelite men. (Num 25: 9) Do you want to know what “ *the doctrine of Balaam,* ” is ? It's having one foot in the church and one foot in the world. My Is that your thinking ? Well, let me warn you. It's all right for the boat to be in the water, but it's perilous to get the water into the boat. (a)

(b) THEIR NUMBERING: (Ch's 26-27)

For 40 years after the exodus from Egypt a new census is taken of the children of Israel and only two men of the original multitude that came out of Egypt are still alive. My the Lord keeps His word, of judgment as well as of promise.

(c) THEIR OFFERING: (Ch's 28-30)

Typically, all the offerings speak of Christ and its significant that God speaks of them here as “ *my bread,* ” (28:2) The heart of God, feeds as it were, on Christ and is perfectly satisfied. The book ends with,

(d) THEIR DIVIDING: (Ch's 31-36)

Of the land. The territory they were to possess was given

and arrangements, made in faith, for the division of the land. At last the people were about to enter the promised land. Do you notice the last phrase of the book ? “ *The children of Israel in the plains of Moab near Jericho.* ” (36:13) The book of Numbers ends on a note of expectation, but alas those wasted years. Have you ever noticed this ? That the movements of God's people out of His will are not on His calendar ? (Num 16-20:21) My from the time that Israel despised the promised land (14:31) until they returned to its borders after 38 years of wandering there is no record save the stoning of the Sabbath breaker and the sin and doom of Korah. (Num 15:32-16:1) During these years they were like a regiment of soldiers marking time, but no progress.

On a sun dial in St. Marks these words are written “ *I number none but the cloudless hours.* ” My beware every hour spent out of fellowship with God, or short of His purpose's for your life will in the annals of eternity be unnumbered, uncounted, a blank. It was at Kadesh Barnea they went wrong. It was 38 years later at Kadesh Barnea they got right. (Num 20:14-22) My spiritually speaking are you wandering aimlessly ? Do you need to get right at the spot where you've gone wrong ? Listen again to these words of Robert Robinson,

**Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love
Take my heart, O take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above**

