

Chapter 4

NUMBERS

Our Failure and God's Faithfulness

If you read the Old Testament as nothing more than a history of ancient events concerning people who lived a long, long time ago, it is just about as boring as a textbook on mathematics. If you read it as nothing more than a book of hidden prophetic mysteries, it may be more interesting, but it is still a book with no meaning to you personally. However, if you the Old Testament as a picture of what is happening in your own life experience of redemption and grace, it becomes lively and fascinating. If you see in the Old Testament pictures of Christ and his great work of redemption, pictures of his love for and grace to your soul, it becomes precious beyond description.

So, when we read about and study the history of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, we must constantly remind ourselves that the Lord our God is not here giving us the history of a quaint little nation in a remote part of the world. God's interest in and purpose for the nation of Israel was singular. He raised up and used that nation as a vehicle for the accomplishment of his purpose of grace and redemption in Christ, no more and no less.

The Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) and the Book of Joshua symbolically display every believer's experience of grace and salvation in and by the Lord Jesus Christ. In these first six Books of Inspiration we see how that the Lord our God brings us from the bondage and curse of sin and death sin into "*the glorious liberty of the sons of God.*" The whole Old Testament was written so that we might see in vivid types and shadows and pictures what the New Testament declares to be true. All those things that happened to Israel in the Old Testament came to pass and were written down in the Book of God for our comfort and edification. This is precisely what the Holy Spirit tells us in Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:11.

- Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, shows us our great need of redemption and grace.
- Exodus, the Book of Deliverance, displays our experience of grace in redemption.
- Leviticus, the Book of the Priesthood, typifies our atonement by Christ, which is the basis and effectual cause of deliverance.
- Numbers, the Book of Numbering, displays our (the believer's) weakness, unbelief, and failure in this world.
- Deuteronomy, the Book of the Law, shows us God's immutability and his faithfulness to his covenant people in the second giving of his law.
- Joshua, the Book of Deliverance, displays our entrance into and everlasting possession of all the blessings of grace and glory in eternal, resurrection glory with and by our Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth Book of Moses is called "Numbers" because it opens with the numbering of the children of Israel (1:1-4:49) and concludes with the numbering of the people again (26:1-65). Both numberings were done, not as acts of pride and presumption (2 Samuel 24), but by the express command of God.

If you read through the first five Books of the Bible at one sitting, it appears that Leviticus might be out of sync with the others, because it interrupts the historic narrative. That is because the Book of Leviticus is a parenthetical explanation of God's work with his people. Genesis shows us our great need of redemption and grace. Exodus displays our experience of salvation in time. Leviticus shows us, in type and picture, that God deals with us in grace upon the basis of Christ's finished work of atonement as our Substitute. Then, the Book of Numbers picks up the historic narrative, a narrative portraying our struggles as believers in this world with the world, the flesh, and the devil, assuring us that God still continues to deal with his covenant people in grace upon the basis of Christ's finished work, not upon the basis of our experience.

The Book of Numbers covers most of the period of Israel's forty years in the wilderness and the events connected with their wilderness journey. It begins with the numbering of the children of Israel. It describes the divine order by which the camp of Israel was arranged and the order of their movement from one place to another, as they marched through the wilderness toward Canaan for forty years, until all the adults (those twenty years old and upward) who came out of Egypt died. (Someone suggested that Israel's wilderness journey was the longest funeral procession in history.)

Those forty years in the wilderness were the result of the nation's unbelief, specifically their refusal to believe the report of Joshua and Caleb after the twelve spies had spied out the land of Canaan. Because they chose to follow the lead of the unbelieving spies, God judged the nation, and that generation entered not into the land of promise, but died in the wilderness, because of unbelief. The only adults who left Egypt and entered the land of Canaan were Joshua and Caleb. Once the old generation was dead, God commanded that the new generation, that generation to be led by Joshua into the land of promise, be numbered. So, we have the second numbering of Israel at the close of the Book.

Our Unbelief

Now, let's see what the message of this Book of Numbers is. I don't mean, Let's see what we can use in Numbers to teach the Gospel of Christ. I mean, Let's see what the message of the Book of Numbers is. How does God the Holy Spirit here teach us the Gospel?

In these thirty-five chapters we are confronted with that which may be the most difficult thing for us to learn as God's people in this world. We are confronted head-on with that which causes us more trouble than anything else in this life—our own unbelief! It is ever the tendency of our fallen nature to lean unto our own understanding, if not our own to someone else's. The Book of Numbers teaches us that we must believe our God, that we must trust and follow Christ in all things (Pro. 3:5-6), not human reason, our own or someone else's!

This is where I struggle most. I suspect it is the same with you. How we dishonor our God by unbelief! We all foolishly imagine that what we want to do and the way we want to do it is the right way. Oh, we say, "The Lord knows best." But rarely do we act like he does. Like these ancient Jews, you and I must learn that God really does know best. He knows what he is doing when he acts. He knows what he is talking about when he speaks. What he tells us is the truth.

All that he says, all that he does, and all that he requires of us is always for our good and his glory.

How I wish I could learn to live as a man who really believes that! God's way is always right. Our way is always wrong. With regard to all things, Solomon's word is true, no matter what friends, family, the world, and our own proud flesh may think to the contrary. "*There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death*" (Pro. 14:12). The book of Numbers is a picture of that experience in the believer.

Here we have a picture of a people It is a picture of people who have come out of Egypt and have crossed the Red Sea believing God. They have seen Pharaoh and his armies drowned in the sea. They are going to the land of Canaan, believing God's promise to give them the land for their inheritance as his covenant people. But they have not yet reached the land. They are pressing toward the mark; but they have not yet attained the prize. They had the faith to follow God out of the bondage and slavery and darkness; but they have not yet come into the fullness of liberty and rest in Christ.

How much like them we are! We believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. We trust him for the forgiveness of our sins. We have seen Satan cast out and our sins drowned beneath the blood of Christ. We are moving toward heavenly glory. But we have great trouble trusting our Savior to provide for, protect, and guide us in our daily lives and through our daily struggles.

Our Faithful God

But, blessed be his name, our God is faithful still! His faithfulness, his mercy, his grace, his provision is never altered by our experience. He deals with us upon the basis of his covenant and the accomplished redemption of our souls by the sacrifice of his dear Son (@ Tim. 2:13, 19; Ps. 103:8-14; Isa. 43:1-7). Let every ransomed soul, proclaim with Jeremiah, "*Great is thy faithfulness!*"

We see this fact of God's faithfulness, faithfulness in spite of our horrid unbelief, when we get to the latter part of the Book of Numbers (chapters 21-35). Here we see Israel triumphing over their enemies by the hand of God. Their many enemies surround them. The outward forces of Kings Arad, Sihon, and Og, the King of Bashan, and the attempts of Balaam, the false prophet to try to undermine the purpose of God, all resulted only in greater blessedness of Israel.

The Book of Numbers tells us, in the clearest terms God himself can find, that though we are disobedient, though we are rebellious, though we are so full of unbelief and sin, though we live, it seems, in utter barrenness and emptiness of soul year after year after year in this waste and howling wilderness, our great God will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Even in the midst of our weakness, he is our Strength. Even when we fall, he protects us, lifts us up, and holds us in the hands of his omnipotent mercy and immutable grace!

Pictures of Christ

There are four distinct and direct pictures of our Lord Jesus Christ in this Book. Aaron's rod that budded (17:1-13) was a picture of life out of death by which God identified Aaron as his servant. As Aaron was, by the budding of his rod, publicly declared to be God's servant and priest, the Lord Jesus Christ was publicly owned as and declared to be the Son of God with power by his resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:3-4).

The water that flowed from the smitten rock (20:1-13 and 1 Cor. 10:4) was a vivid picture of Christ and our salvation by him. As the rock brought forth water, only after it was smitten by Moses, so the Son of God yields the water of life to chosen sinners only by being smitten to death, to the full satisfaction of divine justice, by the rod of God's holy law.

The brazen serpent (21:1-9) was another clear type and picture of our great Savior (John 3:14-16). Because the children of Israel murmured against him, in judgment the Lord God sent fiery serpents upon them. The poisonous venom from those fiery serpents killed many. When Moses prayed for the people the Lord commanded him to make a serpent of brass and lift it up upon a pole, promising, *"everyone that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live...And it came to pass that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived."*

Gospel preachers are like the pole to which Moses fastened the brazen serpent. Our only function is to hold up Christ crucified before sinners. The gospel we preach is Jesus Christ. We do not merely preach a Christ centered gospel. Christ is the gospel we preach. There is a huge difference.

Pastor Roger Ellsworth, in his excellent book, *The Guide*, suggests that the brazen serpent (God's remedy for Israel's ruin) typified the Lord Jesus in six ways. He wrote...

1. The remedy was not Moses' idea but God's. Salvation from sin is not produced by men but only by God.
2. The remedy consisted of Moses making a serpent in the form of the poisonous serpents. The Lord Jesus Christ was made in the form of sinful men (Phil. 2:8).
3. As the serpent of brass had no venom, so Christ had no sin (2 Cor. 5:21).
4. As the serpent of brass was lifted up on a pole, so Christ was lifted up on the cross (John 3:14).
5. All that was necessary for the people to be healed was to look at the brass serpent., and all that is necessary for healing of sin is to look at Christ.
6. As there was only one remedy for the people of Israel, the serpent on the pole, so there is only one way of eternal salvation, Jesus Christ.

Many other important points of similarity between Christ and the brazen serpent have been made by others. (John Gill, in his commentaries on Numbers and John, gave many excellent comparisons.) There is one other comparison that must be added. It is very important, but often overlooked. – All who looked upon the brazen serpent were immediately healed of their plague, and every sinner who looks to Christ by faith is immediately made whole.

The cities of refuge (35:9-34) were also typical of our Lord Jesus Christ, the refuge of our souls, the refuge of salvation. Believers are men and women who have fled for refuge unto him,

like the man-slayer in the Old Testament fled for refuge to one of the cities of refuge. Even the names of the cities were typically significant and instructive (Ex. 21:13; Num. 35:6, 11, 14; Deut. 21:2, 9; Jos. 20:1-9). – *Kedesh* means, "holy." Christ is holy, both as God and man, and is our holiness before God, that "*holiness without which no man shall see the Lord.*" – *Shechem* means, "the shoulder." Christ not only bore our sins in his own body on the tree, he bears and carries their persons; and the government of his church and kingdom is on his shoulders. There, on his omnipotent shoulders, we are safe and secure. – *Hebron* means, "fellowship." Believers have fellowship with Christ and with the Father in him; and in him we have fellowship with one another. – *Bezer* means, "a fortified place." Christ is our stronghold, our high tower, and our place of defense. To him we run; and in him we are safe. – *Ramoth* means, "exaltations." Our Lord Jesus Christ is exalted at God's right hand, and in due time he will exalt those that trust in him. – *Golan* means "manifested." Christ is God "*manifest in the flesh.*" The Son of God was manifest to take away our sins and destroy the works of the devil; and he will be gloriously manifest and revealed at the last day.

In addition to these types, our Lord Jesus Christ is clearly spoken of prophetically by the false prophet Balaam (24:17-19 - Compare John 11:47-52). So great is our God that he uses both Balaam's ass and false prophets like Balaam (men far beneath Balaam's ass) to deliver his message when he is pleased to do so. Christ is that Star coming out of Judah and that Scepter (Law Giver) out of Israel. His birth was announced by a star put in the sky by God's hand (Matt. 2:2). He is called "*the Bright and Morning Star*" (Rev. 22:16). And he is the Deliverer (the Scepter) who comes out of Zion for the salvation of his people (Rom. 11:26).

The Lessons

Now, let me show you some of the lessons the Spirit of God would have us learn from this Book. *First*, There is nothing so dishonoring to our God and so harmful to us in this world as unbelief. We see this clearly in the major theme of the Book of Numbers. God sent Israel in to spy out the land of Canaan, but they believed not God (chapters 13 and 14). Therefore, the Lord God set upon them forty years of judgment, forty years (one year for every day the spies were in the land of Canaan) of wandering from place to place in the wilderness.

I have emphasized the fact that God's favor is never determined by our experience. Divine favor is altogether gracious, free, and unconditional. Yet, as God judged Israel for their unbelief, he chastens us for ours, to teach us to believe him. That is a great blessing. Still, the Word of God is crystal clear. We rob ourselves of much blessedness in this world by our unbelief Isa. 48:17-19; John 11:40; Matt. 23:37-38).

Second, God almighty demands that those who speak for him be heard and obeyed (11:1-17:13). The lessons of God's judgment upon the sons of Korah need to be learned. God's ambassadors are God's ambassadors. Hear them, and you hear God. Refuse and disobey them, and you refuse and disobey God.

Third, multitudes, like the sons of Korah and the mixed multitude in Israel, have a barren familiarity with the things of God. J. C. Ryle wrote, "Nothing so hardens the hearts of men as a

barren familiarity with the things of God.” A barren familiarity with Christ and his gospel is damning and will ultimately bring God’s most severe wrath to eternity.

Fourth, the most deadly thing in this world is the error of Balaam (Jude 11;14). What was Balaam’s error? He served God (or pretended to) for hire (Num. 22:7). He was a man motivated by covetousness. Being such a man, Balaam taught Israel to mix the worship of God with the worship of idols (Num. 25:1-3). He did not teach them to abandon the worship of God, or even to alter it. He simply taught them that the way to get along with the heathen among whom they sojourned was to compromise with them, accepting their gods as God. That is idolatry of the worst kind.

Fifth, there is but one remedy for human sin, but one way of salvation and eternal life. The only way Israel could be saved from the fiery serpents was by looking to that brazen serpent Moses lifted up before them. And the only way you and I can be saved is by looking to Christ, our crucified Savior (John 12:32; 14:6; Isa. 45:20-22).